

SANITARIUM

Bringing you the best in horror fiction, dark verse and macabre entertainment.

Dark Verse:
Terry Miller
Andrew Fortunato
James Michael Shoberg

**ALL NEW
STORIES**
Russell C. Connor
Brandon Miller
Sebastian Bendix
& Much More...



#030

We talk horror fiction, make up amongst other things with

Nicholas Vince

CONTENTS

ISSUE #30

HORROR FICTION

p. 7	Some Notes on the Reproductive Cycles of Arachnids		p. 43	Endless	
	By Nick Kimbro			By Russell C. Connor	
p. 19	A Mild Cure for Depression		p. 67	Something Sweet	
	By Brandon Miller			By Gillian French	
p. 28	Procedure		p. 74	The Red Curtain	
	By Kyle Frost			By Mitch Sebourn	
p. 33	Dial S for Salvation		p. 82	Shriek Of The Harpy	
	By Paul Albano			By Sebastian Bendix	

DARK VERSE

p. 100	The Withering Woman		p. 109	The Darkness	
	By Terry Miller			By Andrew Fortunato	
p. 104	Channel Hostility				
	By James Michael Shoberg				



Welcome to the Sanitarium

If this is your first visit or your 30th, we welcome you and we hope you enjoy your stay. We have great stories and featured to keep you entertained.

Publisher

Eye Trauma Press

Editor

Barry Skelhorn

Contributors

Nick Kimbro

Brandon Miller

Paul Albano

Kyle Frost

Russell C. Connor

Gillian French

Mitch Sebourn

Sebastian Bendix

Dark Verse

Terry Miller

James Michael Shoberg

Andrew Fortunato

Staff Writer

Fran Jones

Clodia Metelli

R. Donald James Gauvreau

Noah C. Patterson

Koffinkids

by David Gacey

This issue is dedicated to the newly added Faculty Members:

Thank you for all your help, questions and guidance and I look forward to formally introducing them next issue.

Publisher Media

Eye Trauma Press

2 Cyprus Row

27a Cyprus Road

Burgess Hill, West Sussex

RH15 8DX, United Kingdom

E. hello@eyetraumapress.com

Cover

by. Kevin Spencer



51_ Group Therapy



113_ On the Record with Nicholas Vance



62_

Noah sits down with Monica J. O'Rourke to talk splatterpunk fiction!



ISSUE THIRTY

Dear Reader,

As we move swiftly into 2015, certain items crop up on the calendar that need (for me anyway) marked in a blood red circle. The HWA Stokers, WIHM (Women in Horror Month) and SCARdiff.

Sadly this month Wayne Simmons announced that SCARdiff would not be held this year. In the wake of this news however a few brave souls have stepped up and we have a few events in July and October to look forward to. More on that as the news arrives.

As mentioned earlier Feb is Women in Horror Month and I am really excited with the amount of female writers in the horror genre. But we could be celebrating these writers every month, not just in Feb - or is that just me? We have showcased countless women and their amazing work in these very pages - and long may it continue.

So we hope you have a great month and you enjoy the stories, dark verse, news, reviews and interviews that await you.

Welcome to the Sanitarium

Barry Skelhorn
Editor

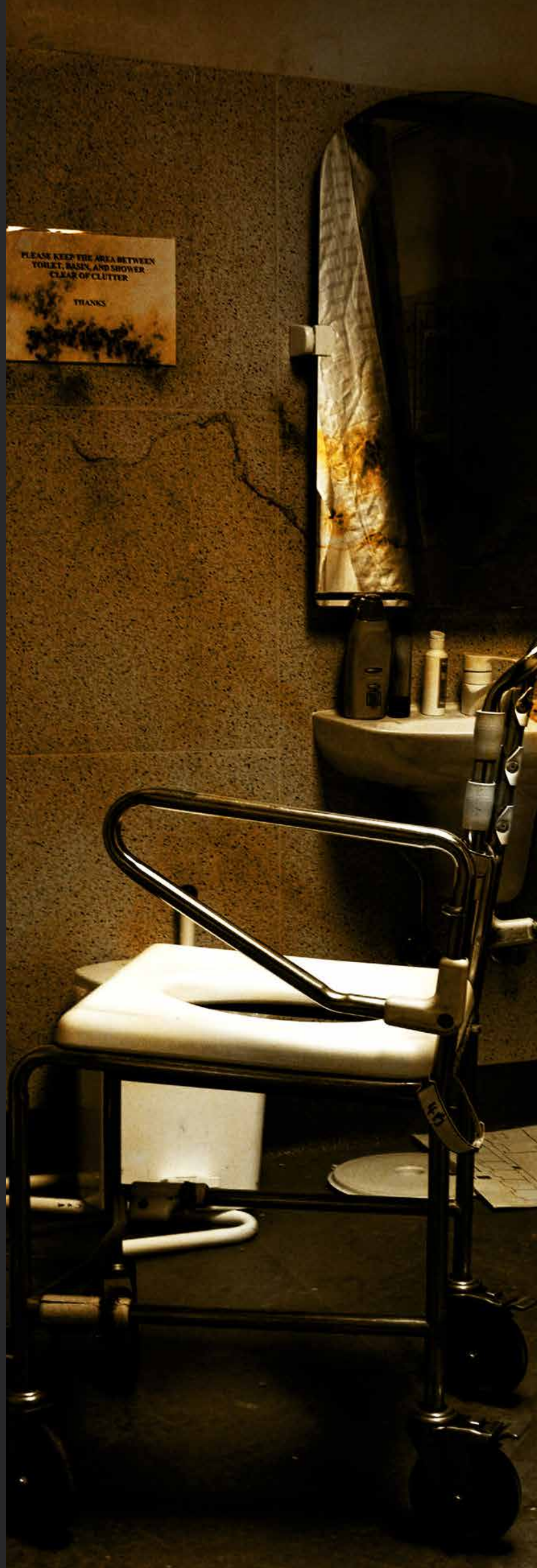


/Sanitariummagazine



@sanitarium_mag

Eye Truma Press, 2 Cyprus Row, 27a Cyprus Road
Burgess Hill, West Sussex, RH15 8DX, United Kingdom



NEWS

Up and Coming Markets

WHISPERS FROM THE ABYSS VOLUME 2

We want authors hungry to play in the twisted universe envisioned by H.P. Lovecraft, or write tales that are in the spirit of his mythos. Like Lovecraft's own work, the horror in this anthology aims to be subtle and subjective. The mind and its inner working are a far more terrifying place than the actual corridors of R'lyeh or the Mountains of Madness.

Ideally this anthology should hit readers like a really good mix tape (or iMix for those of you too young to remember what a cassette is). We want a variety of styles, themes, and moods that hook the readers fast, creep the hell out of them, and leave them wanting more. Experimentation is highly encouraged—especially unconventional narrative styles, meta-fiction, genre mash-ups, even sick humor. Of course, don't be afraid to stick with the tried and true trappings of a madman, if that's your jones.

Deadline: May 30, 2015

Length: 2,500-4,500 words

Payment: 1 cent/word + digital contributor copy. Two print copies will be provided once the book is printed in 2016.

Submission Guidelines: <http://01publishing.com/submissions/open-call-whispers-from-the-abyss-vol-2/>

CURIOSITY QUILLS PRESS

Curiosity Quills Press is a publisher of hard-hitting dark sci-fi, speculative fiction, and paranormal works aimed at adults, young adults, and new adults.

Length: 15,000-120,000 words

Payment: Royalties on print & ebook sales + 5 free print copies

Submission Guidelines: <https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/>

FROM THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE: A CRYPTIDS ANTHOLOGY

Bigfoot.

Nessie.

The Jersey Devil.

Creatures moving in the twilight between fantasy and reality. Beasts that delight, mystify, and terrify. Cryptids are everywhere, in the water, running on the land, or even soaring overhead, challenging our faith in what science knows. From mermaids taunting our ships and Mexican goat suckers who feast on livestock (if we're lucky) to the Jersey Devil soaring overhead, belief is only a blink away.

Deadline: January 31, 2015

Length: 3,000-8,000 words

Payment: \$25 + contributor's copy

Submission Guidelines: <http://www.greatoldonespublishing.com/submission-information/anthologies/from-the-corner-of-your-eye-a-cryptids-anthology/>

GHOST IN THE COGS

Ghosts. Gaslight. Gears. In the wondrous age of steam, pirates, rust, and syphilis aren't all you need to worry about. Ghosts abound! In this hissing and clanking steampunk world, there are moments that science just can't explain. All the mechanical geniuses scratch their heads and whisper words of ghosts and powers, of spirits and demons. Possessed automatons take on lives of their own. Superstitious pilots take all necessary precautions. Avant-garde machinists harness the spirits to power their creations. Revenge-minded ghosts stalk haunted gasworks. This is a mechanized playground for the souls of the dead. These are the tales we're looking for: where the spirit world proves itself at times inspiring and dangerous, useful and annoying. In a rich steampunk world, chock full of gizmos and gadgets aplenty, tell us the stories that go bump, clatter, boom in the night. What if Jules Verne wrote Ghostbusters? What if Scooby and the gang rode around in a steam-powered airship? What if Tesla talked to the dead?

Deadline: March 1 - April 1, 2015

Length: up to 4,000 words

Payment: 6 cents/word

Submission Guidelines: <http://brokeneyebbooks.com/books/ghost-in-the-cogs>

CURIOSITY QUILLS PRESS

What they want:

Curiosity Quills Press is a publisher of hard-hitting dark sci-fi, speculative fiction, and paranormal works aimed at adults, young adults, and new adults.

Length: 15,000-120,000 words

Payment: Royalties on print & ebook sales + 5 free print copies

Submission Guidelines: <https://curiosityquills.com/submission-guidelines/>

PLAYROOMS

Do you remember your childhood? Are all those memories happy ones? What about that creepy little doll that always seemed to be lying under your bed? The one that made you tuck your blanket around your feet so that it couldn't climb in during the night to GET you? Do you remember that as well? What about the scary old caretaker who shouted at you on your first day of school? What exactly was it that he didn't want you to see in the cleaning cupboard?

PLAYROOMS is an anthology where all childhood fears become real. Submissions should feature spaces associated with young children (bedrooms, tree houses, schools, nurseries, etc.) and/or toys, items, objects associated with childhood. Stories should also contain elements of the fantastical or supernatural. Let your fears run rampant with this!

Tales dealing with children suffering sexual assault in any manner are likely to be rejected. If something of this nature is integral to the plot of your story then proceed with extreme caution and tackle it as tastefully as possible. It is best avoided altogether. Deadline: May 1, 2015

Length: 3,000-6,000 words

Payment: Royalties

Submission Guidelines: <http://www.scorchedflower.co.uk/knightwatch/submissions/>



Some Notes on the
Reproductive Cycles
of Arachnids

Nick Kimbro

Physician: Dr. Roundtree
8245-AVD12



CASE #22439

Some Notes on the Reproductive Cycles of Arachnids

By Nick Kimbro

SKIP THOMPSON HATED SPIDERS.

Always had.

He hated Fall too because of how they seemed to find their way into his apartment, scuttling across the carpet and pausing at just the right moment so that he'd have to wait, watching, just to be sure they were really there. A teacher had told him once that the average human consumes approximately eight spiders every year in his or her sleep. If he saw one he'd stay up for hours looking for it. Fortunately, Skip wasn't prone to sleeping much.

Lucas Franklin Westhaven.

Disappeared August 12-13, 2013

CEO Westhaven Mortgages

Estimated worth: \$12.2 Million

Not a mogul, by any means, but if he were they wouldn't have Skip working on it. Skip was a claims investigator for Great Life and, unlike many of his colleagues, actually had real intelligence experience. As in CIA. His tenure had been brief and disastrous, for reasons that had little to do with him. An unpopular war and changing administrations had led to an intense round of vetting during the appointment phase, and extended even to unappointed positions like his. Not everyone was wealthy enough to hide their indiscretions, and so two years into his new career he was finished and looking for another one, although not before undergoing a number of helpful training seminars in topics ranging from weapons training to close quarter combat and evasive driving. He was no James Bond—the training had been optional and fairly light—although he figured it was at least an edge.

So after falling into the bottle for a brief period he'd climbed back out again and was doing fine;

a half-empty can, perhaps, kicked a little bit further down the road to perdition, but for now he was fine.

His query had been missing a month, and the family now was seeking payout on his life insurance policy.

"Is there any evidence to support his being dead?"

"No."

"Threats made prior to his disappearance?"

"No."

"In that case, claimees must wait seven years for the loved one to be declared dead in absentia. Then it will be Great Life's untold pleasure to surrender all appropriate sums covered in his policy."

"We don't like it," the family says.

"Tell you what, we'll have Skip look into it."

So here was Skip, looking into it. On nights he couldn't sleep—and there were many—he would find himself one of two places: the adult theater down on Colfax, or, if he had a case he was working on, in front of the computer doing "research." The clock on the bottom right corner of his screen read, 3:46 AM. Across the room a small, skittering form disappeared beneath the door. He jumped from his seat to kill the thing and disposed of its mashed body in the toilet before returning.

Skip was disappointed to learn that Lucas Westhaven, unlike many of his esteemed, wealthy contemporaries, was in possession of that rare and maddening thing: a clean record. No convictions, arrests, or lawsuits. No incidents on record at work. The only thing that came close was that a neighbor had called the police one time after hearing some "distressing noises" next door, although it turned out to be only Mr. and Mrs. Westhaven engaged in a rather randy session of lovemaking. It was something, he supposed.

Skip perused his bank record, hoping (in the part of his brain where he stored past episodes of SVU) to find something that might corroborate a sexually deviant angle. There usually was—BDSM dungeons or some shit like that—although rarely did it have anything to do with the case at hand. Still, it was fun to investigate. Westhaven, however, didn't even have that. Switching gears, the best thing would be if he could tie it back to Westhaven's wife, Mrs. Lynn Dorothy Westhaven. Great Life was hoping he would find nothing so they could avoid payment for another seven years; after all, who knew what might happen between now and then? But if he could connect Mrs. Westhaven herself it might exonerate them altogether, allow them to make a case for fraud.

But first things first: he made a couple of passes over statements from the past three years and didn't see anything particularly noteworthy. Just a number of City Parking charges—\$2.25 each—all on Wednesdays and Fridays at roughly the same time: 12:45 PM. Lunch hour. Favorite restaurant, maybe?

Skip scribbled down the terminal number listed beside the charge and logged into the City Parking website to search the location. 1600 block in the old factory complex; a place Skip happened to know was basically abandoned. Not exactly a Mecca for fine dining. A few quick searches online soon revealed one business listed in the area—only one: a place called Raingill's Conservatory. He clicked through to the website and, sure enough, the place was a dungeon of some kind. Or, sorry, Deprivation Parlour, purveyors of "the ultimate submissive experience."

"The ultimate" anything, to Skip, was generally a red flag. He clicked through to the About page and found a picture of the Raingill lady: she was tall and stately, probably mid to late forties, with a gray skirt just an inch or so too short for her age. Atop that she wore a white blouse, dark blonde hair put into a bun, and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses. She had a strong jaw, almost masculine in the way it slanted toward her long, powerful neck, but very attractive. Of course, it could have been the context. There was something about a woman who advertised her sexuality, either with the clothes she wore or by way of some other situational factors, that gave an air that whatever you were thinking, she was thinking it too. You could get into trouble thinking that way though, Skip knew. Like so many other things, best to keep that information silent and safe inside your own head.

He'd known women who were into all of that BDSM shit. He thought of Carmen. Something about a woman having her own fantasies, things she wanted to act out. It was thrilling, and, if

possible, more of a violation, penetrating someone's imagination like that; a possession of both body and mind.

His attention returned to the screen, to Madam Raingill. It was too late for a trip down to Colfax. He would have to continue his "investigation" of the website, trying not to think of Carmen, her broken trust, the look on her face. For the most part he even succeeded.

Raingill's was located in the old factory complex downtown, an area basically abandoned since the mid-twentieth century when the state stopped manufacturing its own grain to support the livestock industry. Silos and dilapidated factory houses bore water stains that crept down their sides like fingers, and an eerie silence Skip hadn't heard since venturing into the country two years earlier to investigate a farmer's suicide.

Authentic.

Wind whistled through old vents and broken windows, stirred rubbish in the streets, and somewhere far off he could hear the distant sound of city traffic like ambient noise infiltrating a dream.

Gave Skip the creeps.

It took him some time to locate the conservatory, and even then, mounting the gray, trash-heaped steps, he had to navigate some distance inside before arriving at the Madam's antechamber. He looked at the equipment—long tracks of assembly line connecting mechanisms of hulking rust—and guessed this had been a packaging plant of some kind. Pale, cold light didn't stream in through the high windows so much as it oozed, streaking the walls like trails behind a slug, never quite reaching the floor. Every now and then the machines would tick and groan. Rodents, he suspected.

On the far side of the room, however, he made his way through a pair of nice glass doors into a place he had to assume was the conservatory. This room was as large as the one before it, with immense, high windows, although it had been cleared of all factory equipment and refuse, and the windows had been blacked out. He could barely see anything. Dimly, he made out a number of white spots scattered across the floor, and the more his eyes adjusted the more he thought they must be packages, or elongated sacks filled with rice. He had to squint to even realize they were moving, listing ever so gently from side to side, like larvae.

"Welcome," a woman's voice called in the darkness, and though his eyes had adjusted a little he still could not make out the source. A pair of heeled feet clopped toward him, navigating the sacks until finally a woman dressed in a latex cat suit appeared on his right. He recognized the blonde bun and dark glasses, although she was older than in the picture online. A series of fine lines at the corners of her eyes and mouth, and several broad ribbons of gray running from her hairline back to her bun. Her body could have been thirty though, with large, lifted breasts and an ass from another planet; one without gravity.

"Miss Raingill, I presume."

She nodded. "Madam, yes."

"My apologies, Madam. I'm Skip."

He extended his hand although she only looked at it, then back at him. He was about to go on when she said, "Visits are usually arranged by appointment only. I'm sure you can understand our desire to keep our clients as free from interruption as possible."

She cocked her head behind her, and that's when he realized that those twitching "sacks" he'd been wondering at weren't rice or grain, but people. And what's more, he could see they'd begun to orient themselves toward their voices, angling in their direction, slowly, slowly closing in.

"I... I'm sorry," he said. Then pointing, "Are those?"

"Don't worry," she said with a smile. "Their ears are plugged and their eyes lined with gauze. They can only make out the dimmest of sensations, although depending on how long they've been there even that could be like a bomb detonating. You'd better follow me."

He moved close behind as she led him across the factory floor, stepping over and between the "clients" and staring as he did so. The suits they wore were thick, although if he looked closely he could make out sets of human features: narrow shoulders and mouths stretched wide, working like insects against the fabric.

At one point he caught himself looking too closely and accidentally kicked one in his path. At the contact the form shifted violently, almost sitting up completely before flopping back onto

the ground. Skip jumped out of the way and looked up to find Madam Raingill glaring at him. He didn't know what to say; shrugged and waited for her reaction.

"It's alright," she said at last, and smiled. "Most of them like some contact anyway. In moderation."

Along the far wall was a blacked out door he wouldn't have been able to find if he'd spent hours looking for it—unmarked, like the exit to a haunted house. They entered a short, dimly lit hallway, at the end of which was an office that looked like it could have been a model display at OfficeMax. There were no papers scattered, no books folded open on the desktop. No pens, pencils, staplers. Just a clean glass desk, a couple of file cabinets in the corner and two leather chairs on swivels. The walls were all wood paneling, such that, to Skip, made it look like the cabin on a boat, although without windows. By way of decoration there was only a framed piece of parchment with an ink design that looked almost like calligraphy. Four lines on one side and four on the other, surrounding what very well could have been a body of some kind. He wasn't sure whether it was a Rorschach effect or not, but it looked to him kind of like a spider.

"What's that?" he asked, gesturing at the picture. He regretted it immediately; the last thing he wanted was to get chatty. She glanced at the painting and returned to a series of blank forms and waivers she'd begun to organize on her desk. Evidently she had him pegged as a client.

"So what exactly are your clients up to out there?" he asked.

She cocked her head now and stared at him, as though he should know. "Sorry," Madam Raingill said. "I don't mean to avoid the question, but what exactly brings you here, Mister—"

"Skip Thompson. Just Skip is fine."

"Skip."

"I'm looking for somebody. Missing person. I work for an insurance company—Great Life—and the guy's family is seeking payout on his policy. Before we can do that I've got to figure out what happened to him."

"I see," she said, stiffening a little. "And you're looking for him here?"

"I traced a series of parking charges. Pardon my saying, but there aren't a lot of other options in the area."

She smiled. "No, the neighborhood is experiencing a bit of a recession at the moment."

Tell me about it.

"I was surprised there weren't any payments to trace though. Not even withdrawals. And there wasn't anything about fees listed on the website. Hell of a non-profit you've got going here, if you don't mind me saying."

She laughed politely and uncrossed, re-crossed her legs. "Not exactly. Some pay with traditional currency..."

"Money, you mean."

"That's right. Others make other arrangements."

"What kind of arrangements?"

Again, her smile. Something in it. Was she flirting with him?

"Think about it in terms of commitment."

"Commitment to what?"

"The process. The same way a monastery might charge for a weekend retreat, while the monks stay for free."

"And Mister Westhaven was a monk, then?"

"Mister who?"

He fished his notes from his pocket. "Lucas Franklin Westhaven. Born June 23, 1952. Death unknown, unverified. I hate to bug you about it, but so far this place is my only lead. I'm really hoping you can tell me something."

She stood and smoothed the wrinkles in her latex against her legs. She was a good ten years older than him, easy, but a freak. If he could get the monk rate he could easily see himself going for whatever she cared to offer. Then he thought of the "clients" outside, those squirming, spectral figures twitching on the factory floor. Maybe not.

She went to one of the file cabinets and thumbed through a series of manila files.

"What, again, was the name?"

"Westhaven."

She produced an envelope and held it open on one arm, turned over several sheets of paper. "Sorry, no record."

Skip blinked. "That can't be right. Where else would he be going in this area two times per week?"

"Oh, he may have been a client," she went on, placing the file down on her desk and resuming her seat. "But any information we gather is volunteered, not required. Some prefer the comforts of total anonymity. We have a sign-in sheet that everyone must use and that helps us track payment, but most do so using a pen name of some sort."

"A pen name? What good is that?"

She shrugged. "It's something."

"I don't suppose I'd be able to have a look at this sign-in sheet."

"Sorry," she said. "Confidential."

Skip weighed his options. He could go back and explain the lead to Great Life, try to get a court order, but if Westhaven wasn't using his real name what would be the point? He supposed there was always the chance that, after investigating more, he'd be able to deduce which one was him—he could already eliminate the names with payment assigned—but even that was a long shot. Life would be so much easier if he could just take it, have a look, and then decide.

An image of Raingill bent over her desk, skirt hiked up and arm pulled behind her flashed across his mind. Although his cock pressing against the inside of his jeans reminded him where he was.

Madam Raingill sat in front of him smiling like a television executive admiring a storyboard, imagining how the humor will play out on screen.

"Alright then," he said finally, voice a little hoarse. "Would you mind telling me more about the services you offer?"

"You saw them coming in," she said, gesturing to the factory floor, the "sacks" of people. "Not much more to it than that."

"What are they doing, exactly?"

"It's called sensory deprivation."

"Sounds fun."

"I mentioned that their ears and eyes are lined with cotton. The suits they're wearing are also very thick and restrictive, insulated with gel to eliminate all but the most basic sensations of touch. They can feel the floor beneath them, although not much else. Hence the twitching. Although when you've been in there for a while, accompanied by nothing but your own lewd thoughts, even that stimulation can be intensely erotic."

"Doesn't sound like something one needs to pay for exactly. No offense."

"Not all of them do, remember?" Beneath the table he felt her foot brush against his calf. "Every client here is treated differently, according to his own specifications and preferences. Some want to be left an hour, some want to be left a week. Some want to be touched, some don't, and those who do more often than not want to be done so on a schedule. There are those on the floor, but then there are some who want no stimulation whatsoever. Those are suspended."

"Suspended? Where?"

"Different room."

"And pardon my asking, but what do your clients get out of such treatment? Maybe I'm a prude, but I'm having a hard time understanding the appeal." Which wasn't true, exactly. He could feel it, anyway, tingling in the pit of his stomach.

"You've heard that by taking away one sense you heighten the others? The same's true in this case. The only difference is that we include thought and fantasy among the other senses. How many times have you been thinking about something erotic and experienced a sudden, overwhelming need to enact it in some way? That impulse is a limitation. The moment you attempt to act it out, the fantasy stops. Here we respect the mind itself as the greatest erogenous zone. You'd be surprised what it's capable of when one's body is no longer standing in the way, so to speak."

She paused. "Have you ever had a fantasy, Skip?"

He restrained himself from telling her he was having about twelve right now. "Yes," he said.

"One you tried acting out?"

He thought of Carmen; it hadn't really been his fantasy but it was the first one that came to mind. Appropriately, he thought; the others had all been attempts to recreate, to remember that first, initial experience.

"Did it live up to expectations?" she pressed.

"Not exactly."

"Dungeons experience this all the time," Raingill went on, ignoring the thirty yard stare on his face. "Clients coming in claiming to be masochists, saying they want this and that. Severe caning. Flogging. Ball torture. Whatever. Then they start and guess what? Their dommes have barely started warming them up before they're squealing in pain, begging them to stop."

"Fantasy versus reality..."

"Exactly. The funny thing is that many of them will even claim to have lots of experience. Say they've been caned a hundred times before. Cyber caned. They learn pretty quickly though that it's not the same thing."

Ain't that the truth, he thought.

"It's all a failure to recognize the nature of fantasy. The mind itself is an erogenous site, the fantasy's pleasure just that: cerebral."

"So that's what your clients do out there all day? Just lay there and daydream? Why can't they do that on their own? What brings them here, of all places?" He lifted his hands in an attempt to indicate, not the office, but that whole side of town.

Raingill shrugged. "Some appreciate the loss of control. Others, the restraint. You see, many of our clients have experienced instances where their mental appetites unexpectedly cross physical boundaries. Minor cases of assault, mostly. Office groping. That hot little secretary you imagine yourself grabbing every time you see her? One time your hand just does it, automatically, without thinking. Such a small thing on the surface, but careers, marriages have been ruined for not much more."

This was beginning to sound familiar. He wondered for a moment if this could all be an elaborate joke. Or a sting.

"What about you, Mr. Skip?" she asked, grinning. "Have you ever wanted something that got you into trouble? No need to be shy. You couldn't possibly tell me something I haven't heard before."

He swallowed and attempted to sound casual, slouching to hide the tremor skittering along his spine. "Not that I know of," he said.

"Mmm hmm." Her thighs crossed and uncrossed. "Well, if you're ever interested—for the purposes of research, of course—I'd be happy to offer you a complimentary session."

He laughed, nervously. "I'll keep it in mind," he said, and tried to sound patronizing although she was the one still smiling. She leaned across her desk. The zipper running up her chest slipped just a little beneath the strain.

"I know you will," she said.

They shook hands and exchanged cards. Hers had a direct line on it. So did his. And she led him back to the door to the factory floor.

"I hope to see you again soon, Mr. Skip."

"Likewise, Madam Raingill. I'm sure I'll have some follow up questions." He held up her card to indicate that he would be calling. With a nod and a smile she closed the door, leaving him to traverse past all of the white, man-sized slugs littering his path. In the dark they seemed almost to glow. He was focusing on the double doors, at the light on the other side when, once again, he tripped over one of the bodies and felt it tremble, a muffled groan of pleasure coming from its gagged and hooded mouth. He moved faster, more carefully, taking a moment once he'd reached the exit to look back and see them all pointed now in his direction, a fanning formation spread out behind him, attempting to follow.

The spiders multiplied nightly. Gray little things with long, spindly legs and thin, peanut-shaped bodies. They skittered and they hid. He'd heard daddy long-legs were one of the most poisonous spiders in the world but that their fangs weren't capable of transmitting the venom. They held it inside of them.

He'd taken to capturing them in jars. There was the one he used to trap them, and the Pen, as he called it, which he kept sealed with a few air holes on his desk. Every now and then he would consolidate the two, dropping in new captives until they began to pile up, to seethe together like an awful lung. He wondered how long it would take for them to start eating one another.

1:26 AM.

Tegenaria domestica, the funnel weaver spider, also known in Colorado as the common house spider, reproduced annually in the Fall. Most of the year you could find them in shrubs, trees, thick grass; out of doors mostly. They hunted by spinning dense “funnels” of silky webbing, waiting for a prey to enter before appearing themselves at the opposite end. Like most spiders, they produced far more offspring than had any hope of surviving, and the infestation Skip experienced every year, he figured, were all the babies scrambling to find a warm place for winter.

As with most species of arachnid, the females were much larger than the males and had the annoying habit of eating their mates during or after copulation. In order to reproduce safely, male house spiders had to find a way of paralyzing the female so that they could get in and out uneaten. Some sought out newly molded females, hoping they’d be too weak to pose much of a threat. Others performed strange dances that shook the webs in such a way as to lull the females into a state close to trance.

Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t.

It was a bizarre thing: no one knew exactly what role this reproductive cannibalism played in the propagation of the species. The average spider’s life cycle was approximately three years in the wild, as opposed to in captivity where some species lived up to twenty-five. The disparity was due almost entirely to the hazards of reproduction.

Skip read for a little while longer before glancing again at the clock. Now 2:14 AM. He needed to sleep. He had to visit Westhaven’s widow tomorrow, and figured he’d get more out of her if he didn’t look like someone who stayed up all night torturing spiders.

Which reminded him: still no signs of cannibalism inside the jar. Perhaps they were all male? Or just not horny enough.

He opened a new tab and pulled up Raingill’s Conservatory, some other tabs too, and by the time he shut off the computer and lifted himself from the office chair he cast one more glance at the Pen before shutting out the light. The mound of bodies looked slightly smaller than it had before.

Skip sat with Mrs. Westhaven in the sunroom, although there wasn’t much sun to speak of. Outside it was cold and cloudy; the light pouring in felt wet. He sat on a floral-printed love seat while across from him Mrs. Westhaven sat in an antique mesh rocking chair, elbows pressed forward on her knees. She’d brought him a cup and a tin of hot water, a small wooden box with several varieties of tea. He chose gunpowder.

“It’s good,” he said, taking a sip, and she nodded as though waiting for him to elaborate. She was dressed business professional, although Skip knew she hadn’t worked in over ten years: a pencil skirt with white blouse and a blazer. Her hair made him think of the sprout on a pineapple, the way it separated and lifted from her head in short, piecey layers.

He asked about their marriage, how she and Westhaven had been getting along prior to his disappearance. “Good,” she said. “Or, sorry—well. He’d been cutting back on his time at the office so it seemed like we were spending more together. Communicating and all. It was good.”

“Had his work been an issue in the past?” Skip asked.

She thought about it. “Not really. Not in a special way, at least. Sometimes when you’re busy you just miss each other. Even when you’re together.”

“Not lately though?”

“No, not lately. Things had gotten better since, well, since the incident.”

Skip looked at his notes. Incident? “Which incident is that?”

She blushed and looked away.

“Not this thing back in June...” It was the instance where the neighbor had called the police on them. For sexing too loudly. “My records show that was a false alarm. Nothing came of it.”

She nodded. “Yes, that’s how it appeared in the report. We both agreed on everything and the officer apologized for coming out. Fell out of touch with the neighbor afterwards too. Although there was a little more to it.”

His turn to lean forward, propping elbow on knee, chin in hand, cuing her to continue.

“We didn’t say anything that was untrue, understand. It was consensual and enthusiastic, at least to start. Lucas and I were into a lot of different things though. Sometimes they went too far.”

“Is that what happened then?”

She bit her lip. “We had safewords in case one of us ever needed to stop. But... How can I explain this?”

She turned and looked at the carpet to her right, her lips moving silently, rehearsing. When she did speak her words were measured and calm, like part of a speech—they wouldn’t have been at all out of place in a court document, he thought—although even while she explained the numerous reasons one might have for ignoring a safeword, he could see that her lip was trembling. Her eyes darted around the room, avoiding his. He still didn’t know exactly what had happened—she was doing a very good job of talking around it—but felt a sudden, profound urge to comfort her, to apologize. Instead, he reached out and placed his hand on her knee.

Her body stiffened at his touch, and he knew he’d made a mistake. She looked up at him and, at first, frowned. Although a moment later her brows smoothed out, eyes narrowed on his, questioning. He couldn’t see a mirror, but knew that the expression on his face was not one of sympathy. His grip on her knee tightened involuntarily before he withdrew.

“I’m sorry,” he said, finally, although it was no longer what he meant. He waited. “You don’t know why he might have disappeared, do you? Any evidence to suggest that he’s deceased? Any enemies who might wish him harm?”

She sighed, which he knew meant No, although she didn’t want to say it. Was she aware what she’d just told him moved her up on the suspect ladder? Or was she still just thinking of the policy, the payout?

He nodded and sat his empty cup on the coffee table, leaned forward. “I don’t suppose he kept a work area in the house, did he?”

“He had an office. The police and detectives already checked it though. Nothing there.”

“I know it’s a long shot, but the company would feel a lot better if I checked it myself.”

“Of course,” she said and stood, waiting for him to follow. Suddenly she was all business again, eager to please, or maybe just to change the subject. Her cheeks were flushed. Dollar signs flickered in her eyes like candles inside a jack-o-lantern. “Right this way.”

She led him out of the sunroom and through the kitchen, down the hallway to the back corner of the house. “Take your time,” she said, and left him there, disappearing down the hall.

One alone he undid the top two buttons of his shirt and dropped into the leather office chair, checked the drawers of Westhaven’s desk. Two contained rows of hanging folders, alphabetized. Financial reports, mostly. Another contained office supplies—pens and pencils, a stapler, some stamps. A third seemed to hold all the pertinent paperwork for his family: birth records, vaccinations, he and his wife’s marriage license. Skip shifted his focus to a bookshelf on his right. At first glance it was disappointing. Books on finance, investment banking; political figures’ memoirs. On the bottom shelf though, squeezed in with a bunch of coffee table art books, he found a volume of bondage photography. Or at least, that’s what he thought it was. Inside there were black and white pictures of figures in suits stretched over the ground, a close up of a face pressing through the material, its mouth stretched wide. Was it screaming?

In another was a mid-distant shot of an empty room, one of those bound figures center frame, suspended by his feet from the ceiling. Close by was an empty steel chair facing him, and in the left corner a long, thin shadow leaned into the frame.

There were a lot more like this; in some there were naked women crouched over them, always doing something, preparing something, not just posing. Toward the end he turned the page and there was another close-up of a hooded face, features pressing through. It was uplifted, he could see, with the faint outlines of a smile dimpling the fabric. Where the eyes were, there were shadows. And when he turned the page again he found only the back cover: no acknowledgements page, no “About the Author.” Although printed on the reverse was a symbol that looked awfully familiar. Calligraphy of some kind: two oblong circles, hedged on either side by a series of lines. A spider was his first thought, then he realized where he’d seen it before. Madam Raingill’s office, the conservatory. A self-published collection of photos? Memorabilia? Or something else?

He turned the book over and looked at the front. It was matted black, no image, although engraved across it was a title that read simply, Devotions.

He took his phone from his pocket and snapped a picture, made up his mind to leave before Mrs. Westhaven returned. He navigated his way back through the hallway until a low moaning coming from the living room stopped him in his tracks. Being very conscious of the wooden floor beneath him, he crept forward, pausing just around the corner and listening. The sound

now was accompanied by the wet motion of her masturbating. Thanks for your hospitality, he thought, although he didn't leave. He listened and wondered what her motive was for doing this. Whether she'd intended him to find her like that, and what she expected him to do. He was beginning to sweat. The thought that she might be asking for something agitated him.

Got to get out, he thought. He remembered what he'd read about male spiders and the elaborate strategies they had to employ to survive reproduction.

This was nothing like that.

Nearly drenched, he finally managed to move past the opening without looking in on her and, very gently, opened the front door. Immediately the moaning stopped, and he slammed it behind him and strode across the grass to his car, did not look back.

The snow began early that morning, a light scatter that could either stick or burn up in an hour. First snow was always that way, seeming to drop out of nowhere early October only to dry up and not return again until Thanksgiving. The day was bitter and gloomy though, and the flakes continued to fall just enough to keep the grass and sidewalks lightly dusted.

It was only 4:30 PM, although the factories stood against a nearly dark sky, windows black and broken, the falling snow muting what little traffic there was in the distance so that it felt like walking through a fallout zone, a slow-moving shower of silent ash.

Skip walked the outer edge of the sidewalk, hands jammed into his coat pockets and eyeing the stoops and alleyways in front of him. Every now and then he would glance at his wet footprints fading into the gloom behind him. They were the only tracks anywhere, the rest an undisturbed plain of grainy white.

Almost full dark. He cursed himself for not scheduling the meeting earlier in the day. But then, Madam Raingill had been pretty quick to seize the opportunity.

"That's fine," she'd said. "In fact, that will work perfectly. There's something I want to show you and it only happens at night. This night in particular, in fact."

He clutched his gun underneath his jacket. It just so happens I have something I want to show you, Miss Raingill. He'd begun carrying his .38 Special again wherever he went. If Great Life didn't like it, they could find someone else willing to do this kind of work.

When he arrived finally at the old building, inside didn't seem as dark as it had before. His eyes must have already adjusted on the walk up. No sunlight streamed in through the high windows, although he could see the equipment as clearly as if it were day, quiet and looming like mini-versions of the buildings outside. A microcosm of disuse and neglect. He made his way past them to the double doors. To his surprise, the room on the other side—the conservatory, where just two days prior there had been at least several dozen "clients" bound and writhing in white suits—was empty. Not a single human form to speak of. A sudden feeling of abandonment made his heart race; like a trap door springing shut. His hand reached inside his coat and rested on his gun. He closed his eyes, opened them again. Still, no one.

"Hello?" he called. "Miss Raingill? It's Skip Thompson. We have an appointment?"

His voice sounded off the high brick walls, creating almost an echo, although when it returned to him it sounded garbled and unintelligible: an inarticulate groan. He heard a door open and close to his left, Madam Raingill's voice calling out to him. "Mr. Skip! So good to see you! Do you like the remodeling?"

"Remodeling?"

The sound of her heels was deafening as she strode across the floor. She gestured around them. "All the furniture."

By this, he reckoned, she was referring to the clients. "Suits me well enough," he said. "What happened to them?"

"Graduation," she said.

"Graduation from what?"

She came forward until her eyes flashed faintly green. "That's just what I wanted to show you."

No sooner had she reached him than she turned again, and he made several steps to follow before planting his feet. "Miss Raingill, uh, if it's alright with you I'm really in quite a hurry and would rather stick to business. Would you mind if we headed back to your office so that I can ask you a few final questions and be on my way?"

"This is business, silly," she said, turning and smiling so wide her teeth alone seemed to light

up the room. She was certainly in high spirits, he thought. "You're here because you still don't understand quite what we do, and without understanding that, you cannot understand what your query, Mister, ah—"

"Westhaven."

"Yes, Mister Westhaven's involvement is. Sorry, was."

"Yep," he admitted. "That's pretty much it."

"So follow me," she said. "There's just one thing and then I'll be pleased to sit and answer any questions you still have. Although I think this will answer a lot. You can even bring your weapon, if it'll make you feel more comfortable."

"I don't—" But she had already turned and begun marching back across the floor. He hesitated a moment, looked around. He thought he could find his way back to the office on his own, maybe grab what he needed and get the fuck out of there. But if Madam Raingill knew about his gun and that he'd stolen confidential files from her, well, that would be pretty much be the end of him at Great Life. Good Life. Even Passable Life. All of that would be out the window.

She led him to the door she'd just come from. Reviewing his mental blueprint of the place, he reckoned this must be about where the silo was located.

"I've got to admit," she said, speaking over her shoulder as she walked, "I didn't think you'd come."

"Why not?"

"When we met earlier, I didn't think you were ready."

He didn't respond.

"To face yourself, you know. It takes time, usually. Some softening. But eventually I knew you'd find your way back. The timing couldn't be better."

They'd arrived at a door, which, until they were right up on it, had been all but invisible, like they were just standing there in the dark.

"Look," he began. "What I really wanted to ask you about—I mean, the thing that I still don't get—"

"Shhh," she said. "There will be time afterwards for your questions. If you still have any." Her stop had been so abrupt he'd nearly walked right into her. Their bodies were close now; he could smell her breath—sweet and metallic—when she spoke. It was dark and they were alone. So many things could happen.

Without knowing why he did it, he placed his hand suddenly on the wall behind her head, leaned close. He wanted her to feel the dark along with him, the isolation, the danger; the loss of every good opportunity because of one decision to wander into someone else's imagination. He'd expected to hear her breath quicken—he looked forward to it in fact—but instead all he saw was her smile. He thought of Carmen.

"Hold that thought," she said.

Before he had a chance to answer, she'd opened the door and stepped in and to one side, clearing a path for him. He followed hesitantly into a room that, unlike the one he'd just come from, was bathed in blue. He could tell by the cylindrical height that he had indeed entered the silo, and his eyes automatically drew upwards. He could see now what had been done with all of the "furniture." The figures in their white suits hung suspended at different heights, like tree ornaments, all the way up to the roof where a skylight opened onto the night sky, framing the moon. Light snow drifted in and shimmered, floating past the figures all suspended by their feet and hanging motionless, covered from head to toe in that same insulating material and glowing pale in the moonlight. And when Skip paid close attention he noticed that the walls too were covered, all the way up, with a kind of silky residue that also shined in the moon.

For a moment he just stood there, gazing up at them, until he became aware of Madam Raingill's presence behind him. He did not move. Instead, felt her breasts press against his back, hands wrapping around his torso, lips closing on the side of his neck, then a prick, a small nip of teeth. Slight, sweet even. Unable to tell whether he couldn't move or just didn't want to. He remained, staring past all of those suspended pale figures to the skylight and the moon beyond it, where a massive silhouette suddenly shifted into view, supported on all sides by its many legs.

The End.



Nick Kimbro

Nick Kimbro received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Colorado at Boulder. His work has appeared in Hello Horror, Fogged Clarity, Danse Macabre, Miseria's Chorale, Space Squid, Spring Gun Journal, Heavy Feather Review, The Yoke, and numerous anthologies. His novella, SURFACE INTERVAL, was published by Jersey Devil Press. He and his wife live in Denver, Colorado, where he is a hairstylist and amateur kickboxer.



A Mild Cure for
Depression

Brandon Miller

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29



CASE #92332

A Mild Cure for Depression

By Brandon Miller

HAMET TALL AND WIRE THIN LOOKED THROUGH the back passenger window at Iggy whose mass of electric shock black curls were splayed over the surface of his leather jacket balled up under his head.

Hamet lit a cigarette as he watched what must have been Iggy's hundredth get crushed into a cork colored blob in the backseat ashtray. "You sure you don't want me to stick around we could find some pot or something-"

Iggy opened one eye and looked at the window, the autumn city sky was a dismal grey above them, the granite building blurred into it. The color scheme suited his mood. He saw the look of concern on Hamet's face, it was probably real. But it didn't matter.

Hamet wanted to get back across the street to the little corporate coffee bar with the little red head and the little locked room in back, wanted to get her skirt up and his pants down.

"No, I'll be fine just a mood," Iggy said like a man half asleep.

Hamet had watched with an elaborate number of sighs as Iggy had descended from his mania to a balanced level of contemplation, then the downward spiral into outright depression.

This wasn't the first time and it wouldn't last. But it was bad when Iggy began turning down the remedies that could be bought on the street for ten, twenty or thirty dollars.

Still there was the girl waiting and wanting and he wasn't going to disappoint. "All right," Hamet said, he reached into his jacket and pulled out the only thing that he could think off that would sustain Iggy at this point. He flipped the half full packet of cigarettes into the back seat onto Iggy's belly.

"You sure?"

"Yes, go fuck her already!" Iggy said irritated, wishing that Hamet and the other twenty-million inhabitants of the city would vanish.

Hamet shrugged his thin shoulders and dashed across the street his shoes bouncing on the pavement.

Iggy closed his eyes the autumn chill touching his brain, normally fall was his favorite time of year.

After all ahead there were more nights of travel. Halloween was coming. Drugs were to be bought and taken. Words and songs to be shouted and sang with glee. Perhaps a trip home to see all the old friends, frantically waiting for the stories that would spin like webs off his tongue.

None of these facts touched him.

There was nothing.

His mania had begun to die down maybe a week ago, then for a short period he had felt for lack of better word normal.

Then he felt it, the minuscule pinprick in his brain, a tiny dot. He had known it was coming. In a matter of days the pinprick had grown into a galaxy swallowing black hole and now it was all he was. He felt like he was lying in a casket. Only proper that it be built out of his car in some strange far off city.

Jack Kerouac had lived and worked right down the street from here, typing like a mad man breaking open inhalers to swallow the benzedrine inside many years ago as he pounded out "ON THE ROAD".

There were things in this marvelous city to do and see. Things he had been looking forward to. But now all he wanted to do was sleep. But he couldn't. So he would just stare at the blank insides of his eyelids. Feeling the empty space in his head. It was his fault and he knew it. He felt guilt for subjecting both himself and Hamet to his ill working ever morphing brain chemistry.

Then he heard the tapping of long finger nails on the glass of the passenger window.

He stretched his legs through the back, reached blind into a pack to pull out another camel, he opened an eye to find a lighter and tell Hamet he was fine and he should go away. That he would feel better in the days to come.

But it wasn't Hamet.

It was this pretty young blonde thing, in a skirt too short and too tight for this time of year, juicy written across her pink shirt, her emaciated frame on sale for all eyes to see.

"What?" He asked searching for a lighter, popping the camels filter in his mouth.

"Hi honey you don't look so happy, let me in and I can fix that."

She taps on the glass again with her fingers as though he were dumb and didn't notice the first time.

Iggy's single eye looked her up and down, she was probably a prostitute either that or a concerned young woman who looked like one and wanted to do her ethical and civic duty by making sure all unhappy travelers were given reason to smile. Either way he didn't want to look at her face. "Get the hell out of here."

She puts her hands on razor thin hips like she was insulted, like he had actually called her a whore.

She opened her mouth to speak.

Iggy pulled the cigarette out between two fingers and didn't let her get a word in. "Go. Now. I don't like your face or your shirt or your offer to make me happy go now!" Iggy jerked the unlit cigarette towards the back window as though he owned the street.

He closed his eyes and heard the clicking of two way too high heels as they went away. For a moment he was allowed to fall back into his half-awake melancholy.

Then there was a knocking on the window much louder this time. Iggy had no doubt that this was in fact her pimp come to beat him up as punishment for his unkind words. He opened both his eyes so he could have them knocked out good and proper. He would even roll the window down all the way so he wouldn't have to get out of the car.

It wasn't a pimp, it was a cop.

The girl stood behind the officer, grinning with meth worn teeth.

Iggy sighed.

"Sir I need to ask you to move your car, this space is for businesses only."

Iggy lit his cigarette and sat up, looking around he didn't see a no parking sign.

This time he opened his mouth to speak, the officer halted him with a hand. "Out of the car sir."

"Officer I'm-".

"Out of the car now," The cop barked.

Iggy sighed again, the girl behind clapped her hands.

Iggy glared at her, the officer paid no mind.

He hauled himself out of the car, and began reaching into his pocket for his ID.

The cop stopped him turned him around, began to frisk him.

Feelings of annoyance and violation were added to Iggy's melancholy.

He glared at the day before him, hating all of the hours it held.

At the coffee house where in the back, Hamet was doubtless done or almost done with his first round with the redhead and was about to prepare for the second.

He gritted his teeth.

"Officer, officer," came a frantic voice.

Iggy turned his head just enough to see a sweaty man in a yellow rubber jacket and bent up eye glasses.

"This young man is my next patient he has I must say like business here," the man reached a sweaty palm into his pocket and retrieved a business card.

The cop didn't take it.

"Doctor Frank Schimidity," he said making the assumption the officer couldn't read.

The officer ignored him and continued to frisk Iggy up and down.

"Please officer don't give this poor youth any more trouble than he already has."

The officer pursed his fat lips and let Iggy go but stood within snatching range if he should try to bolt.

"What's his trouble? He's illegally parked here lying in the back seat."

"Yes, yes, waiting for me to be done with my lunch so I might help him." Doctor whatever his name was eyes bored into Iggy's, encouraging him to say yes.

"Yeah," Iggy mumbled. Looking with deep longing at the back seat of his car.

The officer looked from the Doctor to Iggy.

"What's his trouble?" The officer repeated.

"Well," The Doctor began giving him an uncomfortable look. "Doctor Patient confidentially all that but what else do you think would cause a young man to lie in the back seat all pouty on a beautiful day such as this one. And then not at least inquire into the offerings of a young lady's modest profession?"

"What?" The officer asked.

The doctor brought up a fist and coughed into it, "Umm." He looked at Iggy. "Do you mind if I?" He waved his hand in a erratic circle.

"Sure," Iggy answered exhaling a cloud of smoke aiming for the girl.

She glared.

"Well, you see he ahh he suffers from severe depression hence the sleeping on this day and he ahh well he is-" Another cough into the hand. "is unable to- Well as an officer of the law you understand that he is unable to rise to a level of impeachable offense."

All three looked at the doctor expressions standing vacant.

"What?" Iggy asked.

"He has accession deficit disorder."

"What?" The officer barked.

"He frequently bounces the check of love," The doctor tried again.

"Ohhhh I get it." The girl howls with glee, putting a set of dirt crusted fingernails over her horrible teeth, "he's got a limp dick."

Iggy's pale face gained a bit of color.

The officer opens his mouth and stepped away from Iggy as though his hypothetical impotency might be contagious.

The yellow coated doctor grabs Iggy's shirt and hauls him to the door of his office.

"But don't worry maiden of the walk and protector of the public good, I've got the cure for both of these terrible maladies." He stuck a triumphant finger in the air.

The officer and the prostitute watched them go.

Iggy found himself in the back room behind a nice clean and clearly unused office. The back room itself looked like a dental office from hell.

An operating chair.

Cans of nitrous gas.

A table lined with loaded syringes.

And dark red jars with a bulging pairs of testicles from some animal floating in the liquid.

The doctor directed him to the chair.

"Look man, thanks for your help but I don't have a problem with my dick I just want to lie down in my car and-"

The doctor turned transforming for a moment into a blur of yellow and stuck him in the arm with a sharp hypodermic. From the sting in his arm the fear began to rise, but it was pushed down as a nice warm feeling began to come over him. Immediately his limbs had all the power of an ants. He collapsed into the operating chair unable to move.

"Nonsense, you clearly suffer from depression and impotency it's nothing to be ashamed of young man." The quack doctor began to shuffle Iggy's arms and legs into position.

Iggy tried to move but couldn't twitch a muscle. Worse yet he was slipping closer and closer to unconsciousness. He tried to concentrate, but a surreal feeling of wellbeing had fallen over him. It was actually nice not feeling depressed anymore.

The doctor now had his back to him looking over his collection of instruments.

Iggy heard the sounds of metal being moved, clicking and clanging together like a strange set of musical instruments.

"You will feel much better when you wake up. I have had many successes, senator Lindel Tenor was one of my customers but business has been a little lax in recent months so I think I need a young man such as yourself one who might use that internet to sing the praises of xenotransplantation and then everyone can be cured of these two scourges that scour our beautiful land."

Iggy mumbled something that may have been a threat but it lost its menace in a blur of incomprehensibility.

The doctor turned and held in his hands the tools of his trade. In the left was the scalpel rusted and dull but with a little bit of sawing it would rip through flesh just fine. In the left were a pair of tongs that may have been bought for cheap at a superstore somewhere, made for cooking not surgery. He placed these down on the tray next to the operating chair. Iggy glanced at them trying to work out what he was going to do or if he should do anything at all. His eyelids flickered like the poor buzzing lights overhead.

The quack doctor in the yellow coat went back to the table of supplies and retrieved one of the red jars, he set it next to Iggy's head. Iggy looked at them, a big pair of bulbous balls covered in thick hair. Xenotransplantaion, the word echoed from some obscure text or article Iggy had once read but couldn't place it.

"This is an old procedure. I tell you it works. It works! Many success stories and you when you are happy and giving it to all the girls on the block you will thank me and tell everyone."

The quack wandered over to the gas canisters and rolled them to Iggy. The sound of hissing filled the air like a menacing snake, the doctor picked up the scalpel and held the mask to his own face inhaling deep. "First a little happy gas for me then lots for you. We'll be done in less then half an hour."

He tapped the red jar with the furry nads inside. "Goat," the doctor gasped out, "known for their fertility."

The doctor placed the little pink mask of happy gas over Iggy's face.

"Breath deep," the doctor commanded.

Iggy's mind was numbed and muddled by the drugs, swimming in a sea of pleasure. He wanted to sink deeper, he instantly recognized the anesthetic effects of nitrous oxide which he had bought from head shops from time to time. One of his favorite chemicals. He breathed deep for the good doctor, got higher sleep grew closer, black edges appeared around his visions. Like the curtains ready to pull shut on a theatre stage. He was about to be cut open and have goat testicles sewed inside him. Well, who was he to say? Weirder things were true. Who was to say this wasn't going to work? Crazy people were often right. Modern medicine didn't know everything. What are you thinking! His brain bleated like a dying cow. Mmmm num num the gas is nice, was what he was thinking.

The doctor unscrewed the cap of the jar, with the tongs took out the testicles and set them on the little table.

The blackness grew ever closer. The curtains were sliding shut. Shows over folks. Get ready for the applause.

"Big breaths now," somebody says.

Iggy took big breaths.

The doctor pulled up Iggy's shirt exposing his pale stomach, and leaned with the scalpel almost to the flesh-

Iggy had one last moment of sense, an image of him an hour later with two big bulges jutting out of his skin, goat testicals jammed in to sit next to his liver.

The curtains shut.

Iggy came to his head feeling like hell. It was slow but his mind came back.

He remembered the goat balls.

He whipped his shirt up and looked at his stomach, a pot belly yes. But no extra pair. The only testicles in his body were his own. It was all dream. He was in the front passenger seat of his car, looking out at a city street.

Put a hand to his head, tried to rub the headache away. What had he taken that had given him such a bizarre dream? Better yet how did he get to the front seat of the car. Then he noticed the flashing of police lights.

"Godamnit," he hissed.

He looked around and he saw the quack doctor struggling as he fought with a set of police officers. Four of them struggled to get the maniac in cuffs or into the car.

"I must cure him! I must cure the country of this scourge you filthy brutes! ONE IN TEN! ONE IN TEN!" A police officer took a chance and cracked the quack on the back of the head. Iggy saw a little bit of red as he hit the cement. They hauled him up and threw him into the back of the police car, he lay across the seat head hanging towards the floor.

They slammed the door and the car pulled away.

Iggy climbed out of the Oldsmobile and watched it go away, mouth hanging open.

He saw Hamet and his girl for the day talking to an officer.

Hamet turned and saw Iggy. He came up and gave Iggy a quick uncomfortable hug. "You all right?"

Iggy fought him off trying to stand. "Yeah I'm fine," he reached into his pocket but couldn't find a cigarette.

Hamet gave him one and had one for himself lighting Iggy's for him.

"What the hell happened?" Iggy said rushing a hand through his hair his legs shaking, his arm stung where the needle had gone in he rubbed at it.

"That nut was trying to slice you open." Hamet looked at the girl. "She had to get rid of some customers, we forgot to turn off the open sign. But they were making a huge fuss so I went back to see how you were doing and saw you walking into the building. I followed and waited in that office for you." Hamet paused and looked at him crosswise, "I didn't know you had problems with?"

"I don't. He was crazy, figured anyone who was depressed must have-" Iggy shook his head lips around the cigarette. "No I don't have a problem with that."

"Anyway you like crazies so I figured you were chatting but I really couldn't hear a lot of what he was saying. Then he said big breaths or something like that and thought you guys must be havin a good time so I thought I'd come in and chill and there he was about to cut into you."

Iggy flicked ash onto the sidewalk.

"So I saved your ass. Took a minute to realize what was going on but once I did I grabbed him and got him away from you, choked him off till he passed out. Stuck that mask on his face so he stayed passed out. Carried you out and did the one thing we don't like to do."

"Called the cops," Iggy said.

"Why the hell did you go in there?"

Iggy waved the question away, "Did they say I need to go to a hospital."

"Ambulance was here and checked you out he ahh he stuck you with a needle, they say you need to get tested," Iggy tapped his foot in nervous frustration, anxiety boiled into his blood.

The cop came over and began taking down Iggy's statement about what happened. He told it all and the cop went away.

Hamet's girl stood in the corner, dancing back and forth in place.

"They said there's a clinic you can go too right now if your up to it. Their open for a little more

want me to go with you?"

"No, go have some more fun with her," Iggy said flipping his cigarette at the girl. He still wasn't in the mood for company.

Hamet went with him anyway.

They sat. Then the Doctor took Iggy's blood and tested it.

Test came back twenty minutes later. Negative on all fronts.

"That's great man." Hamet clapped Iggy on the back. "We have to celebrate."

Iggy shook him off. "Go see your girl we're leaving tonight, I don't think I can stay here much longer, we'll come back some other time. I'll meet up with you at the coffee house in like an hour or two."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

They walked outside into the evening. Hamet took off one way down the street practically sprinting back to the arms and legs of what's her name.

Iggy went the other looking for a library and a head shop.

Hamet came out of the back room pulling a shirt on over his sweaty skinny frame. He heard the sound of hissing as he walked.

This time they had remembered to turn off the open sign, but forgot to lock the door.

He was surprised to see Iggy sitting feet propped on a table inhaling off a cracker, a home whipped cream dispenser that could be used for inhaling nitrous oxide.

Iggy held his breath getting buzzed out of his head. "Locked the door for you," he said holding his breath.

He unscrewed the cap a mini canister of nitrous rolled across the table as he loaded another.

"Can I have one of those?"

Iggy held up a finger to tell him to wait, the girl came out from the back fixing her little skirt.

"Coffee please," Iggy said to her while huffing the gas.

She went behind the counter to get it for him.

He looked at her breathing deep. "Did Jack Kerouac ever work here like when he was alive?"

The girl looked at him uncertain of what he was talking about.

"Don't know," Iggy concluded. "Course you don't," he laughs a little hands a mini canister and the cracker to Hamet.

Hamet smiles to himself. He screws the canister into place takes the hit. Immediately he feels the distant drunken feeling, mass euphoria, with sounds reverberating from all over. He exhaled hard and took the rest passing the cracker back to Iggy. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah," Iggy said.

The girl brought him the coffee, Iggy didn't touch it.

"So I went to the library before I got some supplies, Nitrous is cheap here."

"Mmm laughing gas," Hamet moans a little drool wetting the corner of his lip.

They laugh at each other.

"Xenotransplantation," Iggy continues, "it was popular in the early 1900s as a cure for depression and impotency, which once again is not a problem for me."

Hamet slid the cracker back towards Iggy.

Iggy loaded it and took another hit.

"Well, you have been a little down in the dumps the last couple of days."

"First to admit that," Iggy said reaching into a bag and pulling out a bottle of vodka. "Didn't even card me."

He poured two shots worth into the coffee, began to drink. "But that's all over now. I'm alive and well and that maniac did remind me what the best cure for a young man with depression in this country is."

"Almost having goat nuts stuck in you?"

"No." Iggy said shaking his head. "My friends drugs and alcohol, my friend drugs and alcohol." Iggy tapped a finger on the cup before scorching his tongue as he downed the spiked coffee.

Iggy's heavy eyebrows jerked up and down at the effect.

Hamet was pleased to see that for whatever reason, he was cured for the time. Hamet took the bottle and took a little swig, if they were going he was driving.

He gave the bottle back to Iggy. "Didn't you say to the cop that the dude operated on a senator?"
"Mmhhmm." Iggy said loading the cracker for another hit. "Linden Tenor," he gasped and jerked his arms and legs as he exhaled.

"Did you find out how he's doing?"

Iggy took the rest of the hit. "Ohh he's dead."

"Well, thats not a surprise," Hamet mumbled.

"Yeah three months after the operation, some people man will try anything to get a little happiness for their brains and extremities. Course-" He loads another and takes a deep breath off the cracker and points his finger at Hamet."You go by the idea that happiness for the later means happiness for the former."

"Well, it does doesn't it?" Hamet asked.

Iggy shook his head and once again loaded the cracker and took a hit.

The End.



Brandon Miller

No Details Released at this Time.



Procedure

Kyle Frost

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19



CASE #96838

Procedure

By Kyle Frost

“OKAY, THIS TIME IT IS GOING TO BE... PERFECT.” Todd said as he gathered together all of his belongings.

“This time it is going to be perfect.” He repeated to himself as he began laying out his delicate selection of tools, items, and equipment he would need for the presentation. He had a plan drawn up in his mind with every little detail accounted for. Todd never really was one for writing things down. If they were forgotten, they must not have been very important to begin with.

Rising from his hunched position, he stretched his shoulders back and let out a long breath. The fog curled off his lips swirling and dancing through the air before dissipating. Todd slowly rests his hands on the cool, stainless steel table, glancing over the instruments. In the empty room, he lifts one small, sharp tool whose thin edge gleamed in the dim light. After careful examination, he replaces it and moves onto the next tool.

Todd examined every piece very meticulously, slowly raising it to his eyes, turning it over in his palm and feeling the grip of it before returning it to its previous position exactly where it had been. He looked over every inch of metal, plastic and rubber before him.

Everything he would need was laid out. Todd even placed down additional tools just in case there was something he hadn't accounted for. He would only have one chance to do this, at least, for a while. He had to get it right; he had to have everything perfect.

His steps click against the hard tile floor as he approaches the door to the room, listening for the distinct metallic snapping of the lock to ensure he would not be disturbed. It is **his** time and he is NOT going to have it ruined by some campus staff or perchance some wandering student.

Returning to the table, he opens up his laptop and places it on a metal stand beside the lab table. He carefully set up a webcam for an overhead view of the presentation. Finally he settles himself into position and presses a button on a remote and a small red light on his webcam flicked on. He is not only recording the session, but broadcasting now live; he could afford no

mistakes.

"Hello class, today we shall be performing a basic dissection. Well, I will... not any of you. You will all be observing." He pauses for a moment as he anticipates the events soon to follow. An almost menacing grin spreads across his cheeks as he continues, "I will be instructing you in the procedures you should come to expect in basic surgery through this demonstration. So, let us begin."

Todd drew the surgical mask across his face, tying it around the back of his head before he slid on the blue nitrile surgical gloves, making sure each finger filled out the glove properly. He drew the first tool from the silver instrument stand and held it in front of the camera for a moment.

"I am about to make the first incision just below the sternum since we will only have time to examine the contents of the lower abdomen. For other procedures you may need a bone saw, I however, am obviously not able to use that myself. So let us continue!" Todd exclaimed with a hint of nervous excitement. The first cut was always the most important. He could risk damaging the tissues just below the skin and muscle which would cut his recording session much shorter than anticipated and immensely undermine the whole point of making the video in the first place. He had to get it just right... complete perfection.

The small blade of the scalpel pierced the flesh and slowly drew a straight line down, stopping just shy of the pelvic area. He placed the blade down and wiped away some of the blood rising from the fresh cut. Soon, he reached for the next tool in his arrangement: a long piece of equipment that bore a resemblance to a bear trap.

"This, class, is a favorite piece of mine, the abdominal retractor, it simply goes in like so!" Todd said, letting out several muffled grunts as he places the tool at the opening, more blood flowing from the edges of flesh and soft tissue as he forces the piece in. He continued, grunting as he cranked the adjustment knobs on the handles of it, widening the already massive gash in the body. Many of the organs were now visible in the harsh white light of the lab. They carried an almost strange, unreal look to them as if they were props, but they couldn't be further from it.

"Now for the real fun." Todd said under his breath as he began removing the largest organ at the forefront of the opening. He placed a pin into it with the label "Large Intestine" as he spoke to the class, a slight twinge of pain bothering him as he spoke. "I'm sure most of you already know what all these organs are, but for the sake of reminding you, I'll be more than glad to label each one of them."

Todd continued removing organs, one by one. His blue gloves reached into the dark, wet and bloody maw, and emerged with a new "tasty specimen" as Todd so often put it. He was very careful not to sever any of the main fleshy attachments between the organs. Preserving the condition of them would be key to making the video a complete success and then maybe he would finally be recognized in this school. They wouldn't forget his accomplishments for years after he had left for good.

Regaling in this thought, Todd became so elated that his movements became more fluid and swift. His slicing became faster and more frequent than before, he was so engrossed in his work that he nearly forgot to continue commentating. He removed each organ, labeled them and raised them up in plain view of the camera, as a child might hold some small drawing or creation in hopes of seeking approval. Then he placed them down beside him and continued. He soon grew tired from all his excitement and working. His breathing grew heavier and echoed back to him off of the walls of cadaver storage and metal shelves. He nearly struggled for air as he neared the end of his project. Blood thoroughly coated his surgical gown and gloves; he could feel it over nearly all of him.

The frigid temperature of the lab was finally beginning to set in as Todd took a deep breath. He placed yet another tool down on his instrument stand as he closed his eyes. The fluorescent lights had started to give him a headache or a migraine, he couldn't really tell anymore. He couldn't focus. He let his hands rest on the table a moment, "That concludes today's lesson."

His voice trailed off as the recording light continued to glow a bright, ominous red.

"OPEN UP! POLICE" yelled the officer as his leather-bound fists pounded away at the steel door to no avail. It budged no more than a mountain might have in this situation. The officer continued trying to force his way inside, even throwing a shoulder or two into it.

“Todd! Are you in there?! We just want to talk to you!” cried a mother standing behind the officer with her husband who could only shake his head and look down at the tile floor while another officer joined in the barrage.

“What could your son possibly be doing in here, Mrs. Butcher?” asked one officer; his voice rang with an utterly perplexed tone.

“I-I don’t know...” she said, looking down, “He left a note saying he was doing a project here, but... he was expelled from school several months ago...” She felt ashamed to admit it, but after all the hard work he had done and all the pushing she did for him, her son was expelled from the foremost medical school in the state.

As the banging continued to echo throughout the hallway, finally a member of the school cleaning staff approached the small cluster of people surrounding the door. They didn’t have time to waste for an administrator or any major school representatives to arrive, it was midnight and Todd hadn’t been seen for nearly 4 hours. The first officer snatched the key from the man and without hesitation unlocked room and burst through the doorway, hand resting on his firearm just to be safe, but it would not be needed.

The group were laying eyes on a sight more horrific than anything they had ever seen before.

Under a single white light in the room sat Todd.

On a sleek, steel examination table.

His body was slumped forward, propped up by some make-shift seat he must have crafted to keep his torso straight.

Surrounding him were multiple organs and other visceral pieces... his own. Dark blood matted his hair, face and hands. Shiny metal clamps and forceps hung from veins and arteries inside his torso, almost floating in the black and red abyss of his chest cavity.

Shocked, the officer froze in place as he took in the entire scene and slowly processed what exactly sat before him. Then he heard a scream.

Behind him he could see the mortified expressions of the parents. He would never forget the expression of the mother. Her eyes gleamed with silver from the fluorescent light as tears rushed down the sides of her cheeks. Her mouth was open, bearing her teeth in a fit of both anger and sorrow at what had occurred. The worst of it though, the worst of it was her cries; the shrill scream followed by cries of anguish with only loud gasps for air to break up the sobbing.

He called for an ambulance while his partner rushed the parents out of the room, blocking their views as much as he could with his stocky frame.

The officer could not help but stare at the scene as he called it in. The young boy’s body shined as a pale figure in the light with thin, dark shadows cutting across the contours of his physique. The blood was dark, dry, and coagulated. Despite the disturbing nature of the scene, looking at it as a whole, nothing stood out to the officer. Everything seemed so gray and empty.

Nothing stood out except a single light, glowing with a devilish red tint at the edge of the tragedy.

The End.



Kyle Frost

Kyle Frost currently resides in South-Eastern Pennsylvania. He was first published by his college's publication, The York Review, in 2014. He is studying Professional Writing and Psychology at York College of Pennsylvania where he will graduate from in 2016. He is currently working on multiple short stories and a novel.



Dial S
for Salvation

Paul Albano

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41





CASE #75163

Dial S for Salvation

By Paul Albano

ONCE THE RADIO MAN FINISHED THE FIRST of several announcements that evening, one hundred and twenty-four people drank the Kool-Aid and died together at the Community Center three miles away from Bill Gable's home.

Bill sat in his living room, waiting impatiently for his friend to arrive. The twilight of the evening sent a dark shade of blue into the living room where he now kept a Coleman lantern powered by battery on a wooden table in the center of the square area. The power had been gone for about two weeks. And every evening, Bill went to sleep in fear—not of the dark but of being alone.

He hated being lonely, never finding someone to share his life with or even the last few days of life—that was until he finally got in touch with his friend a day or two ago. He wasn't exactly sure. The mass panic had combined the days into what felt like a single lonely one for Bill. All he could do now was wait in his living room, keep the radio on, and pray for the batteries to hold out as well as for his friend to arrive in a timely manner.

Sporadically, the radio man would broadcast information to the public, well to those who had battery-powered radios at least. Many of the souls in the community had no radio source and ventured to the Community Center where a large, jukebox looking radio stood in the basement used for bingo on Wednesday nights when life was normal.

With the living room increasingly cloaked in darkness, Bill decided it was time to turn the Coleman lantern on its lowest setting so to conserve the battery juice for when his friend arrived with the supplies he requested him to bring. Next to the lantern was Bill's trusty battery-operated radio. The tuner was set on 105.1. Bill hadn't moved the dial for the past week when the announcements became more urgent and the public paid closer attention to them.

A crackling sound emanated from the small speakers and Bill leaned towards the radio to hear the radio man speak for a second time that evening.

"As I said earlier, the end is upon us," said the radio man in his deep voice. "The time is coming

and you must all make that decision very fast. Seek salvation, I beg of you. The clock will soon hit zero. Those who stay behind will be consumed with regret. Seek salvation and pick up the—”

More crackling sounds cut off the radio man for now, Bill knowing with confidence he would hear the deep voice again. The time was indeed coming and the clock would surely strike zero very soon. But Bill was not about to seek salvation. He didn't believe in it and thought it to be a trick.

Bill pressed his back against the couch and sighed with trepidation, wondering where his friend was and hoping **he** didn't decide to seek salvation and save himself, leaving Bill alone.

“I don't want to be by myself,” he muttered and looked to his left. On a small end table rested a cordless blue telephone his mother had gotten him for his tenth birthday. Fifteen years later, Bill still kept the phone. No need to get rid of something that still functioned properly and Bill was not one to get rid of gifts from the most important people in his life—even if this particular important person left him after seeking salvation once believing the announcements to be valid and witnessing the chaos around her. She pleaded for Bill to do the same but he was afraid that doing so would bring him to a place where people's greatest fears engulf them, hence the trickery. In his case, he would forever be alone. So he didn't join his mother the day she sought salvation.

“Maybe I should have done it to,” Bill said, continuing to stare at the telephone. A knock was heard and Bill jolted up, rushing to the door, and feeling relieved he would not be lonely anymore. He opened the front door and his friend stood holding a plastic bag filled with energy drinks and potato chips.

“You have no idea how hard it was to track this stuff down,” his friend said with a smile, entering the home and heading into the dimly lit living room.

Bill went to the lantern and flicked the switch on the side of it to increase the illumination. He then took out one of the two energy drinks his friend brought with him and a bag of potato chips. He placed the bag and can on the wooden table near the radio, still crackling and bellowing bits of static every so often. “Did you see anybody out there Gino?”

Gino shook his head, helping himself to the second energy beverage. “No,” he replied, opening the can then reaching for a chip. “This whole neighborhood is deserted. Where did they all go?”

Bill glanced at the telephone and then back at his friend. “They might have bought into the trick. You see Gino? They're all gone because they believed the lies told by him.” He pointed to the radio. “He's a crafty guy this radio man. Where did he come from and why does everybody with a working radio constantly tune into him?”

“Why are **you** Bill?” Gino asked sipping his drink. “If you think he's so evil, why not change the station and listen to something else?”

“He's on every station,” Bill whispered as if the radio man would be able to hear him. “And besides, I rather have something to listen to than bear the silence of a lonely house. I hate the lonesomeness this entire situation has brought upon us. Don't you?”

Gino shrugged. “I've been alone most of my life Bill. The past couple of weeks have been no different for me. But I have to admit something to you.”

Bill leaned over the wooden table, pressing his elbows on top of it. “What is it? You know the truth? You know what's really going on?”

Gino shook his head again. “I almost picked up the—”

“God!” Bill snapped, interrupting his friend. “Don't tell me that. It's the last thing I want to hear now, you abandoning me.”

“Me?” Gino said in a defensive tone. “What about your mother? She dialed last week, right?”

Bill nodded reluctantly.

“We don't know for sure what'll happen Bill,” Gino said glancing at the blue telephone, “but I'm starting to think that it might not be a bad idea.” He faced his friend with enthusiasm. “We could do it together, hold the phone, dial, listen in. All of it. You and me. You wouldn't be alone and I wouldn't die.”

Bill's head nearly fell off his body it was shaking so furiously. “No! It's a trick Gino. It's all a big trick. Don't you see? Everyone that used to live out there probably dialed and is now paying for it, living in their own customized Hell. I can't it Gino. I can't. Do you know what will happen if

you dial?"

"I'll be saved," Gino said quietly. "I'll be taken away from here."

"No," Bill murmured. "You'll be forced to face death for eternity, just like if I dial I'll endure a constant feeling of loneliness gnawing at me. I don't want that Gino. Now you agreed to come here and wait it out. Why are even talking about picking up the telephone?"

Gino sighed. "Don't you find it odd though? The power is gone everywhere yet the telephones still work. How can that be?"

"IT'S A TRICK!" Bill hollered. Maybe it was the thought of his biggest fear that led to the uncontrolled outburst. Perhaps it was because of the constant crackling from the radio instead of the radio man's voice. For certain, however, it was because of the conversation about picking up the telephone and dialing for salvation. "I'm sorry," Bill said, calming down and taking another swig of his drink. He dug his hand into the potato chip and grabbed the biggest one he could find.

"Don't be," Gino said. "It wouldn't be right for me to be angry at you for feeling the way you do. And maybe you're right. This might all be a trick and the end is when you **do** dial and listen."

"That's what I think," said Bill.

The crackling on the radio ceased and the deep voice of the radio man flowed out of the speakers.

"It's coming quick, faster and faster now. Please I beg of you, seek salvation. Pick up your telephones. Don't you see it is a sign that they are still in operation? It is a sign indeed!"

Bill glared at Gino in an I-told-you-so way. "That's what they want you to think. They want you pick up those damn telephones. God, who's ever behind this whole thing must be a genius. How can you cut off power from everybody but keep the phone lines intact?"

Gino crackled a smile. "Because it's a sign."

"Dial the number folks. You will not be able to forever," the radio man continued. "Dial and seek salvation. To the lucky souls listening in, I beg of you to reach for those telephones and dial the seven sevens. You will not live if you refused to do—"

Static ensued and the radio man was gone once again, this time Bill hoping he would not be back. The less radio man, the better now. Bill didn't need the company of the cunning man sending falsity through radio waves anymore. He had his friend sitting across from him enjoying two of his favorite things—two things that reminded him of normalcy.

"What do you think he was going to say?" Gino asked staring mesmerized at the radio.

"I don't know," Bill said, eyes wandering around the room. "Have you been thinking of the 'lasts' lately now that the end is near?"

"The 'lasts'?" Gino repeated confused.

"You know," Bill replied. "When was the last time you did a specific something? Name anything you want."

Gino rocked his head left and right, contemplating an 'anything' Bill asked of him. "Going to the movies," he blurted.

"All right," Bill said smiling. That used to be one of his favorite things to do...with friends of course. Rarely did he spot a lonesome soul sitting in the dark theater watching a flick on his own. He could not help but feel sorry the guy and his fear of becoming that poor sap grew and grew until he forced himself to look away from such a man and focus on the large screen. "When's the last time you went?"

"Umm," Gino said sipping his drink. "It must have been a month ago. I went to see that new superhero movie with my cousin."

"Did you have a good time?"

"Yeah, I mean as good a time as you can at a movie theater."

"I'm glad," Bill said hanging his head, "because that will be the last time you ever go to the movies. Do you see what I'm getting at? Everything you did two months ago or two weeks ago when nothing happened yet have become 'lasts'. The last time you ate pizza from your favorite place. The last time you watched a baseball game on the television. The last time you slept with a woman. You've never thought about them?"

Gino twiddled his fingers on the wooden table, wanting to reach for a chip to eat but felt his appetite dwindling and being replaced by his own fear. "That's what people think about when

they're about to die Bill. I don't want to die."

"We aren't going to die but we have to realize that the lives we lived just a couple of weeks ago are now gone. I can't help but think of those 'lasts'."

"The last time I was with a girl was a lot longer than two weeks ago," Gino teased. The living room briefly filled with laughter. "And I guess it was a good 'last'. It was in the back of my old Pontiac Firebird. You remember that car?"

Bill giggled. "That damn car could get stuck in half an inch of snow. How'd you do anything in the back of that thing? You had bucket seats there too."

"Well," Gino said shrugging his shoulders, "that's why I'm only guessing it was good. She stuffed her hand down my pants and that was really all we could do back there. I should have just kept her in the front seat and reclined it."

"It's better than getting rejected and having her crawl out of the car," Bill said, looking at the can in his hand. "The last time I had one of these was at Chris Baker's house. It must have been about six months ago. Do you remember him?"

"Sure," Gino replied, forcing a potato chip into his mouth. The giggles and talks of a handjob brought a small desire for the salty snack back for him. "He was the captain of the football team back in high school, always threw the biggest parties and didn't care who showed up. He definitely wasn't your typical snobby jock."

"He was a great guy. You weren't there but he was handing out these drinks called Cocaine. It had to be the worst thing I ever drank but we chugged them down nonetheless while failing to make a bonfire in the middle of his snowy backyard. That had to be most fun I had at one of his parties, probably because we were all on a sugar high and drunk at the same time." Bill rubbed his thumb over the top of the can. "I hadn't seen Chris at all until last week, when I worked up the courage to head to the grocery store because I was craving a piece of chocolate cake—get one last stomach full of it. I was walking on Main Street and I spotted this circle of bodies in the center of the Green. My curiosity pulled me towards them as I wanted to see who was on the ground. Well there he was, pale as a ghost and dried bloodstreams staining the corners of his mouth. I ran home, wanting nothing more than to forget about what I saw and curl up on that couch. And then I thought of that last time I saw him alive, with the Cocaine drink in my hand and a few lit twigs near my feet. But what was beginning to replace that memory was the one I had just made, the one with Chris dead on the ground. I didn't want a 'last' of mine to be corrupted that way. So when I finally got a hold of you, I figured I'd create a new 'last' for this," he held up the can, "so that I can have some peace of mind whenever I think of the last time I ever guzzled down the worst thing a person could drink."

Again, both men laughed but could barely hear each other chuckle.

"Is there a 'last' that you're most proud of?" Gino asked. "Everyone has a favorite of something. What's your favorite last?"

Bill exhaled a deep breath and placed his nearly empty can on the wooden table. After telling that story about Chris Baker, Bill's immediate response would have been he was most proud he got his friend to come over and drink the energy crap with him. That would have been his favorite because of the ease it brought Bill if not for the ever so slightly twist of the neck, his eyes catching the glistening blue telephone. "Two weeks ago, I spoke to my mother on the telephone and she was trying to convince me that what was being said on the radio was truthful and I needed to start taking it seriously. I refused to do so and hung up on her. We talked a few days later when she attempted to get me to dial the seven sevens but failed. Now the difference between those two final conversations I had with my mother was the latter one was started by her and the former one was started by me. The last phone call I made was two weeks ago. That's my favorite 'last' Gino and the reason I'm most proud of it is because, though it's not the most pleasant 'last' by any means, I know in my heart that it's the last phone call I'll ever make." Bill stared directly into Gino's eyes with darkness in his own. "I'm never picking up the telephone to make a call again Gino. My last phone call was to my mother and that's how it's going to stay."

A large bang sounded at the front door causing Bill and Gino's heads to prop up the way cats act when seeing an entity fly across a room. Gino immediately thought the worst and believed that whoever was on the other side of the door was going to kill him and Bill. He'd read enough apocalyptic novels to conclude that when crazy shit happens, you can throw morality out the

window. Bill thought just the opposite and rather fancied the idea of having someone else join them, join **him**. Nice people must still exist when crazy shit happens, right?

The door nudged and cracked, nudged and cracked until the splintering of wood was heard. The doorknob fell onto the ground—large slivers littered the floor around the brass knob. The door swung open and in came a tall reeking man in a business suit with a few tears in the black jacket and a white dress shirt tattooed with dirt. He spotted the bright light coming from the living room and walked slowly towards it, facing Bill and Gino kneeling on the ground.

“Oh my God,” said the stranger. “You...you guys are alive. You’re really here!”

Gino and Bill exchanged nervous looks. The one man to break into Bill’s home turned out to be that crazed person from one of Gino’s novels.

The stranger stepped closer to the two men on the ground. “Don’t you realize you’re the only two people left in this town? Everyone is gone.”

“How do you know that?” Bill asked, watching the stranger seat himself near the wooden table.

“I’ve been in and out of every house in the neighborhood,” said the stranger. “The houses are ransacked. Any food that was left from the owners is gone. There are dead animals in the rooms. But no one is around. Some homes are even burned to the ground.”

“They must have called,” Gino said.

“They must have **died**,” snapped Bill.

“I did run into a man on my way here though,” said the stranger. “He told me he came from New York, walked all the way here because he had nothing else to do. ‘The buildings were on fire’ he said. ‘There were killings in the street.’ I didn’t want to believe him but couldn’t help myself from doing so. You have to expect stuff like that to happen when it’s the end of the world.”

Gino asked, “Is he on his way here too?”

The stranger shook his head. “He said the seven sevens was the Devil’s work and then shot himself right in front of me, said he’d been waiting to find someone to tell that to before dying.”

The static from the radio ended and what boomed out of the speakers was the familiar deep voice. “We are nearing the end folks. Seek salvation. It is your only chance for survival. Pick up those telephones and dial the seven sevens. Do it now before it is too late. The Good Book tells us this day was approaching and now it has come.”

The stranger pointed a jittery finger at the radio. “You hear him too?”

Bill nodded. “Everyone hears him. There’s nothing else on the radio anymore.”

“Dial the seven sevens before you can’t anymore,” the radio man insisted. “I beg of you folks. You will be saved. Salvation is just a phone call away.” He stopped speaking then static.

Bill looked to Gino as if to tell him to ignore what the radio man was saying—as if to finally be in agreement with him that dialing the seven sevens was a terrible idea. But Gino had his eyes on the stranger.

“Why are you going through everyone’s homes?” Gino asked the stranger.

The stranger swallowed a mouthful of air. “I need to find a working telephone. All the houses I’ve been in have their telephones inoperable.”

“Inoperable?” Bill echoed perplexed. “What does that mean?”

“They’ve been destroyed,” the stranger said with quivering lips. “The people must have broken their telephones before leaving the town.” He faced Gino. “So they must not have called.” He looked at Bill. “They **must** have died.”

Gino planted his face into his hands. Bill stared aimlessly at the radio wondering if the radio man would come back on and spew more nonsense that would only make matters worse for the three individuals surrounding the wooden table. The stranger scanned the living room and spotting something most desirable to him.

“Does that work?” he asked.

Bill flashed wide eyes at the blue telephone first then the stranger. Gino lifted his heavy head from his open palms and also gazed at the blue telephone.

“No,” Bill hissed. “It doesn’t work. It hasn’t worked since the power went out.”

“That can’t be,” the stranger said, crawling to the telephone and lifting it off its charger. “The phone lines are still working. It must work.” He pressed the large TALK button and placed the telephone against his head. To his delight, a dial tone rang into his ears. “It works. It works! We

can be saved." The stranger sprung to his feet, clutching the blue telephone with might. "I'm calling."

Bill got up rapidly, Gino mimicking his friend.

"You can't," Bill replied.

The static ended and the three men turned to the radio. "Yes, yes it is that time to call," said the radio man.

"It's a trick," Bill claimed. "They want us to call."

"They want us to be saved," the stranger refuted.

"Call and be saved," said the radio man softly. "Dial the seven sevens folks. I beg of you. We are all running out of time. The clock will strike zero and you will never be able to seek salvation. Never..."

Static.

With Gino and Bill still glued to the radio, the stranger dashed down the short hallway and entered the bathroom to the left. He shut the door, locked it, and began to dial the seven sevens.

Bill ran after the man, gripped the knob to the bathroom, but the damn thing wouldn't budge open.

"Stop this!" Bill screamed. "Don't believe what this man is saying. They want you to dial the number."

"If I dial I'll be saved!" shouted the stranger from behind the door.

"Bill," whispered Gino, "let's see what happens."

Bill loosened his grip and faced his friend, looking as though he had failed to convince Gino otherwise and worried that no matter what happened, Gino would be next in line to dial the seven sevens.

From behind the door, the beeps from the dialing bounced out of the small telephone speaker. The stranger dialed and placed the telephone to his ears. Bill and Gino pressed their ears against the bathroom door, hearing the loud ringing.

"It's ringing," said the stranger with joy. "It's ringing!"

The sound of the rings continued. For Bill it felt like an eternity. For Gino, it was almost instantaneous: the stranger dialed the seven sevens, the ringing chimed exactly three times before stopping, and the bathroom door unlocked on its own.

Bill placed a palm on the door and cracked it opened. He pushed the door open farther, a mere inch at a time. Bill looked into the bathroom and saw the blue telephone on the ground turned off...and nothing else. He sprinted inside the bathroom, picking up the telephone as he flung the shower curtains to one side. No stranger in sight. He knelt down and opened the cabinets below the sink.

"What are you doing?" Gino asked. "He's not here. He's gone."

"He might be playing a trick on us," said Bill. "You can't just disappear."

"You can if you dial the seven sevens."

Bill exited the bathroom and went into the living room, placing the telephone back on the charger. A small red light appeared on the base of charger, indicating the telephone was still operable.

"It worked," Gino said from behind Bill.

Bill dug his hand into the potato chip bag and ate nervously. "Yeah it worked. It worked for his enjoyment." A strong finger poked at the radio.

"No," Gino said shaking his head. "The man was saved. He's alive somewhere. He won't die." His head tilted towards the blue telephone. "I won't die either." Gino snatched the telephone off the charger and held it up to his face—staring at the 7 and hearing it call for him to press it seven times.

Bill rushed to his friend. "Think about what you're doing Gino," he urged. "You don't know for sure where that man went but it can't be anywhere good."

No static.

"Dial folks, I beg of you," said the radio man. "Dial the seven sevens now before it is too late. Quickly, go to your telephones. It is a divine sign indeed that they still work when everything else has failed around us. Dial. Dial! Dial and be saved!"

Static.

Gino looked at Bill with his glossy eyes that displayed a mixture of emotions. He was sad to be leaving his friend behind, a friend who could not see that salvation was just seven sevens away. But he was also relieved that doing so would free him of his greatest fear.

"I'm sorry Bill." Gino walked to the bathroom, Bill following behind nearly stepping on the heels of Gino's feet.

"You can't do this!" Bill shouted. "You have to stay here and wait it out. You have to stay with me!" He started crying as Gino groped the doorknob and began closing the bathroom door.

"You can be with me," Gino said, "just as soon as I'm done dialing the number. Then it's your turn."

Bill watched his friend vanish from sight, the door sounding thunderously as it shut in front of him. He heard the TALK button being pressed—the 7 being dialed seven times. "Gino stop this!" he pleaded but to no avail. The ringing chimed once. "I can't be alone!" The ringing chimed twice. "It's a trick. You'll be sent to Hell, a Hell just for you!" The ringing chimed thrice. "Gino don't leave me," Bill sobbed and ran his hand down the length of the door.

The knob made a popping sound and the bathroom door unlocked itself. From his knees, Bill opened it to find only the telephone on the ground, turned off. He crawled like a baby towards it, tears splashing on the cold tile floor.

No static.

"Pick up that telephone and dial the seven sevens," said the radio man. "You will not have another chance to do so. The end of the world is now beginning folks. I beg of you, seek salvation."

Bill pulled himself off the ground and crept into the living room, alone once again with only the voice of trickery to keep him company. He walked past the charger but didn't place the telephone back. Instead, he kept a loose hold of it, plopped down on the couch, and wept continuously.

"Don't be the only one left behind," said the radio man. "Dial the seven sevens before time runs out. Do it now."

"I can't do it," Bill said, as if the radio man was no radio voice at all but a real being sitting next to him.

"You must act quickly. Time is shorter than ever," the radio man warned. "Do you want to be alone when the world ends while your loved ones have already dialed for salvation?"

Bill screeched, "I don't want to be alone! Why did they leave me?"

"This is your last chance folks. Seek salvation and press the 7 button seven times." The radio man sighed. "Here is my final goodbye, folks."

Bill leaned towards the radio and heard a familiar beeping sound.

"I am now dialing the seven sevens myself," announced the radio man.

"NO!" Bill exclaimed.

"Those of you who chose wisely, I shall see you all very soon," said the radio man. "Those of you who remain behind, may God help your weak soul."

Bill heard the ringing through the radio. Once. Twice. Thrice.

Static.

He was now truly alone.

"I can't be alone," Bill said shivering with worriment. "Everyone has left me, even the radio man." Then a thought sparked in his mind, one that blanketed him with light relief. If the radio man dialed the number to be saved, then it **could** be safe to do so. "It must be safe if he did it." Bill lifted the telephone from his side and looked at every inch of the blue plastic his mother had gotten him for his birthday years ago. "Why would the radio man send himself to his Hell? The seven sevens must be good." ***The seven sevens will lead me away from loneliness.***

Bill stood up, placed his thumb over the TALK and turned the telephone on. He remembered what the radio man said about time winding down and that his final chance of salvation was beginning to pass by. It might already have but Bill was too anxious to dial the seven sevens to even think about that possibility.

His thumb shifted downward and hovered over the 7. It pressed once, twice, thrice. The lonesome anxiety began to dissipate. A fourth, fifth, sixth time. Bill envisioned seeing his mother in salvation, feeling Gino hug him and tell him everything would be all right.

Bill pressed the 7 a seventh time and cautiously placed the telephone to his right ear. But no

ringing blasted through the small speaker of the telephone.
All Bill heard was a busy signal.

The End.



Paul Albano

Paul Albano is the author of the self-published novel Twenty Twenty-Six. He is a writer not bound to a single or few genres but can write any compelling story and enjoys disclosing the unexpected at its conclusion. He has completed four other novels in the thriller, horror, and drama genres and is currently pursuing a literary agent. Paul can be contacted via email (palbano1989@gmail.com) and Twitter ([@AuthorPALbano](https://twitter.com/AuthorPALbano)).



Endless

Russell C. Connor

Physician: Dr. Edgar
9828-SJE41





CASE #74891

Endless

By Russell C. Connor

"OH, LET'S GO THROUGH THE CORN MAZE!" Anna exclaimed, pointing at the hand-painted entrance sign towering over the gap in the wall of corn stalks. Just a few yards further down was another sign marking the exit.

Jeff took one more look around the pathetic pumpkin patch she had brought him to for their fifth anniversary, mostly to hide the exaggerated eye roll he could feel coming on. The place was packed with families positioning their little brats for pictures amongst overpriced pumpkins that were supposed to be quaint because they were grown right here on this farmland, but the monstrosities were just too deformed to be cute. Seriously, most of these things looked like they would give you cancer if you were stupid enough to eat them. Jeff would never understand why people came to places like this. He would've been content to spring for dinner in the city and then just go home, but Anna had wanted to surprise him.

"C'mon," she pleaded, taking him by the arm. "It'll be fun!"

He allowed himself to be steered toward the entrance, which was lorded over by a slender farmer-type with a blue-and-black checkered shirt and a John Deere cap pulled low over his eyes, slumped down in a plastic chair between the entrance and exit. A group of three teenage girls counted out bills into his hands and then were given permission to enter. They hurried inside, giggling to themselves, and passed a sandwich board sign which read, "ENDLESS CORN MAZE: \$5."

"Jesus Christ," he groaned. "Five bucks? Really? To traipse through some hayseed's cornfield?" What he didn't add is that he was still fuming about the ten bucks they'd spent for a 'hayride,' which consisted of a trip around the farm's back fields behind a smoky tractor while sitting on itchy hay bales, then stopping twice to feed the cows and chickens. So essentially, they shelled out money for the privilege of performing the farmer's job for him.

"I'll pay for it!" Anna said quickly, beaming at him. She could tell he was miserable, had realized what a mistake this was from the moment they pulled into the lot, and found herself responding with this façade of forced cheerfulness. She couldn't help herself; that was how she always

reacted to his negativity, by plastering on a big, goofy grin in the hopes that it would eventually break down his defenses. Which it never did. If anything, he had only gotten more dour and surly with each passing year of their marriage. Sometimes the muscles in her cheeks ached from holding this false smile in place.

"All right, fine," he conceded. He regarded the maze keeper and his sign while Anna dug in her purse, then looked to the left and right, down the tight rows of dark green stalks stretching out in either direction. The entire front wall of the cornfield, from corner to corner, couldn't be longer than three or four hundred yards. As he studied the field, a family of five strolled out through the exit, laughing and cheering.

"How long's it take to get through this thing?" he asked the farmer.

"Bout twenty minutes," the man replied, looking up from his chair. The face beneath the hat's bill was as rough as sandpaper. "That is, if ya don't get too turned around."

"Twenty minutes?" Jeff smirked. "I guess 'endless' has a different definition out here in the boonies, huh?"

The farmer shrugged and looked into the distance. "Take it or leave it, makes no nevermind to me."

"We'll take it!" Anna jumped between them before Jeff could antagonize the poor man further and slapped ten dollars into his callused palm. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, granting them admission. The two of them walked beneath the entrance sign and into the corn maze.

The path was a narrow, beaten dirt trail, bounded by black wire mesh to hold back the corn and help keep the maze defined. Most of the ears had been harvested, leaving behind only a few empty husks and tiny, broken cobs that littered the dirt here and there like the tool fragments of some ancient civilization. The remaining stalks towered a foot over their heads, the tops swaying in the breeze. They had been planted so close together, it was impossible to see more than a few feet beyond the boundary of the trail. After the path took a sharp right turn, the entrance to the maze and the pumpkin patch were lost behind a dense forest of rigid green poles.

Anna felt a small, pleasant tingle of fear, accompanied by childish goose bumps. She wanted to reach for Jeff, but was too afraid it would make him even more annoyed.

"Hurry up," he told her, setting off at a brisk walk. She matched his pace without complaint, even though, with her shorter legs, she practically had to jog. Soon they came to the maze's first choice, an intersection where the path split to the right and left.

Anna pointed down the right branch, which curved out of sight after a few feet. "Let's go that way."

Jeff shook his head. "No, no."

"Why not?"

"Look, you can't just blunder around and expect to find your way out. Think about where we are spatially, in relation to the entrance. That way will just take us back toward the front wall of the maze and away from the exit. It's gotta be a dead end."

"But my dad always said to stay to the right when you go into a maze and you'll find your way out."

Jeff exhaled hard through his nose. "Yes, and if you do that, you'll have to go through every branch in the maze and it will take twice as long. C'mon, I'll get us outta here."

He went left. Anna followed. The idea of being dragged through the maze no longer felt so fun and exciting. She suspected that her husband had taken the farmer's twenty-minute estimate as a challenge. Why couldn't he just take his time and enjoy something? He used to be like that, back when they first met, but now everything had to be a rush.

Ahead, the three teenage girls that had entered the maze before them were trying to decide which fork to take at a three-way junction. Jeff blew past them—trying not to glance at the coltish bare legs beneath their cutoff shorts—and kept going straight. He looked over his shoulder to make sure Anna was following him as the trail curved away, then looked back in time to avoid running into a dead end wall of corn.

Jeff spun, went back past Anna without a word (she gave him a timid, hopeful grin that sent a spike of raw irritation through him), and returned to the junction. The teenage girls were gone.

He chose the left path this time. Seconds later, it fed into a much wider concourse that he figured must run through the middle of the cornfield, a river with multiple tributaries branching off from both sides. He chose the one he figured the most promising, hit a wall almost immediately, came back, and tried another.

The next few minutes became a trial and error process of exploring different branches at a near sprint and with military precision. Jeff kept a close eye on his watch as he took turn after turn, following the compass in his head back to where the exit had to be. He would show that hick how long it took a real man to get through a maze. He encountered a few other families, all returning to the main concourse from a failed attempt to escape, and mentally marked these as dead ends. Eventually, he realized Anna wasn't following him anymore. After confirming another false trail, he came back to find her standing in the wider aisle with her arms crossed.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Waiting for you to find the right one."

"Yeah, but how will you know when I do? I'm not coming back to get you when I make it to the exit."

"Then I guess when you **don't** come back, I'll know to take that one."

The hint of sarcasm in her voice caused him to shoot her a sharp look. Sweat rolled down his stubbled cheeks. Finally, he took her hand by the wrist and pulled her into another offshoot. "This is it. I know it."

This branch proved to be more complicated than the others. After they had explored every nook and confirmed them all as dead ends, Jeff lashed out with an open palm and sent a withered husk tumbling down the trail. "Goddamn it! Twenty minutes, my ass! We've been in here a fucking half hour already!"

"Maybe you got **turned around**," Anna used the farmer's term very much on purpose.

"I did **not** get turned around," Jeff huffed. He snorted like a bull and held out a hand. "Gimme some water."

Anna opened her purse and retrieved the bottle of water they had bought at the hayride ticket booth. It was only half full now, and Jeff removed the cap and drained the rest without offering her any, then tossed the empty bottle into the corn.

They set off the way they had come, retracing their steps. After another five minutes, Jeff stopped again, panting. "What the hell? We should've at least gotten back to the concourse by now. I **know** it was this way."

This time, Anna said nothing. Mostly because she thought he was right. She could swear they had backtracked, but now none of this looked familiar.

Jeff continued on, and Anna hurried to catch up.

They had been in the maze for a solid two hours when Jeff lost the last of his patience.

This time, he reached over the wire mesh, grabbed a corn stalk, and ripped it out of the dry ground, roots and all. He took the green rod and snapped it over his knee, looking like a sad version of one of the wrestlers he loved so much. Despite her own growing anxiety, Anna put the back of one hand to her mouth to contain a sudden burst of hysterical laughter that would surely turn his ire on her.

"This is **FUCKING BULLSHIT!**" he roared, launching the two ends over the cornfield like tiny javelins. The words drifted above the stalks and then faded away quickly in the open, which only served to make him madder. It was so unearthly quiet out here, with only the soft shushing of the wind through the corn leaves. They had yet to find their way back to the main concourse, and hadn't seen another living soul since leaving it. The maze just seemed to run on and on, with more branches than dead ends. Even the murmur of voices from the pumpkin patch had receded at some point, leaving Jeff's mental compass without a true north. "There has to be a way out somewhere, for Christ's sake!"

Anna rubbed at her goosepimpled arms and looked up. They had arrived at the pumpkin patch late in the afternoon, and now the fall sky was tinged with the hazy gray of twilight. The temperature had dropped a good ten degrees in the last hour, the wind picking up a bitter edge. "What are we gonna do, Jeff?"

"We're gonna find a way out, that's what."

"Maybe we should yell for help."

"Fuck no, I'm not gonna beg that hillbilly to come rescue me."

"What about my cell phone? We could call someone, we could—"

"**Call someone?** Like who, the police? Oh yeah, I can hear that one now. '911? I'm stuck in a goddamn corn maze. Can you send a helicopter to airlift me out?' They'll be snickering about that one at every donut shop in the country for years."

Anna bit her lip. She hadn't figured he would like that suggestion. "They...they wouldn't leave us in here, would they? Like, close up for the day?"

"Who the hell knows? I don't think they were taking a headcount of who all came in. I'd be surprised if they even **could** count."

His insistence on belittling the proprietors was beginning to give her a headache. "But our car's in the lot."

He waved a hand at her and rolled his eyes, but she couldn't determine what the gesture meant.

"Jeff...I'm really scared."

At this, he turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders. His cheeks and brow were a mess, dirt caked in every crease and crevice. She had loved that face so much once, and had been trying to figure out for so long if she still did. When he spoke, his voice had softened...but couldn't she see just a little disgust swimming through his blue eyes? "It's fine. There's no reason to panic. We're not trapped in here, that's...that's stupid. Just give me another fifteen or twenty minutes, and if we haven't found the exit, we'll just...walk out. Straight through the corn, until we get to the edge of the field. All right?"

"All right," she agreed. While the idea of a way out comforted her, the actual thought of walking into that jungle of corn stalks creeped her out to no end.

"Put your leg here! Right **here!**"

"I'll fall!"

"No, you won't! Just hold on to me!"

"Wait, I—"

"**Ow, that fucking hurts!**"

"Sorry!"

Anna got her body positioned correctly and fought to keep her balance as Jeff lifted her up on his shoulders. From this vantage, her head was far above the tops of the corn stalks.

"Well?" he grunted from between her legs. It was the closest his mouth had ever been to her crotch over the course of their relationship. "What do you see?"

"Turn around."

She peered over the cornfield in the gathering night as he spun in a slow circle, looking for any sign of the exit or the closest edge of the maze. Her breath plumed in the cold air. "I can't see anything but more corn."

"Son of a bitch!" He lowered her roughly back down, almost spilling her to the dirt in the process. Jeff didn't want to concede that a carnival attraction designed for kindergarteners had bested him, but he wanted even less to admit the fear that had been ballooning in his chest for the last half hour, not even to himself. **Especially** to himself. "All right, fuck this. We're just gonna start walking in a straight line. Eventually we'll reach the side." He moved toward the closest boundary of the trail.

Anna drew back. "No. No, I don't want to."

He turned, bright red fury stealing up his neck. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't want to go through the corn. I think...I think we should just call someone..." One hand scrambled in her purse and produced her cell phone, the only one they had; Jeff's had been left to charge in the car. "Listen, if we just—"

"**No! I told you, we're not fucking calling anyone!**" He gnashed his teeth and snatched the phone from her hand. Before she could stop him, he reared back and threw it far into the air. It sailed over the corn in a high arc, visible for just a moment as the screen caught the last glimmers of sunlight, but then she lost it against the bruised backdrop of the sky.

“That was really stupid, you asshole,” she said through her teeth.

His eyes widened a bit in shock, she was pleased to see, but he recovered fast. “You wanna stay here, fine. I’m getting out. Right now. See you at home.”

Jeff slung a leg over the wire mesh and stepped into the cornfield.

The stalks were so dense, he had to shove his way into them, parting them ahead with his hands and then wriggling through the gap he’d created. Darkness closed around him. Within seconds, he was lost in a world of shadowed, grasping tentacles. They pushed back at him from all sides, their leaves rattling and dry skin creaking and rasping as they rubbed against one another. He pushed on, concentrated on putting one foot down and then the other, being sure to move in a straight line, but the stalks seemed to resist him now, becoming as tight and rigid as the iron bars of a cell.

And then he couldn’t move any further. He was stuck, with one leg trapped awkwardly behind him and his arms at his side. The corn crowded around him, claustrophobically tight.

His breath caught. Panic choked him. Jeff thrashed, tearing corn stalks out of the ground around him, trying to clear enough space so he could breathe again. He forced his way forward, twisting and flailing, and then, all at once, he was hurtling out of the corn and back onto another trail. He sprawled in the dirt, panting, and looked up to find Anna standing in front of him.

“How did...you get...in front of me?” he wheezed.

“What are you talking about? You went in, crashed around for a while, then came right back out.”

“No. That’s impossible.” He shook his head adamantly as he climbed to his feet. “I went in a straight line, right through the corn. There’s no way I could’ve ended up back here.”

Even though these words terrified her, Anna couldn’t keep a smirk off her lips.

They slept that night huddled together for warmth on one of the maze’s pitch black trails. Anna was hungry, thirsty, and badly needed to pee, but her mind recoiled in horror from the idea of leaving Jeff’s side for a second.

Now that she thought about it, that had probably been her problem all along.

She sat awake for a long time though, listening to him breathe with her ear pressed against his chest. Finally, she worked up the nerve to whisper, “Jeff? Are you awake?”

He grunted in response. He hadn’t spoken much since his episode in the cornfield, and he certainly hadn’t suggested they go back in.

“Do you remember that time in Destin? When we stayed out on the beach all night drinking and woke up on the sand in the morning?”

He sighed, a sound both exasperated and forlorn at the same time. “Yeah, baby. I remember.”

“Do you remember what you said to me just before we fell asleep?”

Jeff took a long time to answer. “That...that I...loved you more than the entire world.” The words might have been forced out of him at gunpoint, might have been a foul-tasting medicine he was making himself swallow.

Anna smiled against him in the dark, replaying that night in her head, when she had felt like the luckiest girl that ever lived. Back then, their love had felt as endless as...well, as this corn maze seemed to be. But at some point, she had become complacent, gone limp, and then Jeff had started to drag her through that situation, too.

In a way, she figured they had been stuck inside this maze for years.

The sun was high overhead once more, just hot enough to make them sweat. They trudged down the trails, Jeff in the lead, taking turns at random.

“HELP!” Jeff bellowed, his voice torn and hoarse. He had been halfheartedly screaming since they started off this morning, beyond embarrassment now, apparently. Even if her tongue hadn’t been swollen and stuck to the roof of her mouth, Anna doubted she would’ve helped him. “ANYBODY? PLEASE, WE NEED HELP!”

Jeff stopped so abruptly she almost ran into his back. He threw his hands to the sky. “This

can't be right! We must've gone miles by now! Miles! No cornfield in the world is this big!"

"Guess we should've stayed to the right after all," Anna muttered.

It was the wrong thing to say.

He whirled on her, one finger coming up to jab at her face. "This is **your** fault, you dumb bitch!"

"How...on God's green earth...is this **my** fault?"

"You're the one that wanted to come here! You're the one that wanted to go in this **fucking maze!**" He punctuated this by tearing a handful of corn leaves from the nearest stalk and throwing them at her.

Anna stared at him, unflinching, as the foliage fluttered down between them. "You're awful," she said, the statement simple and clean and true.

"You wanna stay to the fucking right?" Jeff demanded. "Fine, let's stay to the right!" He turned and sprinted away from her, taking the next available right turn, and the next beyond that. His feet pounded against the packed dirt. He kept running until his legs ached and his lungs burned. When he finally came to a gasping stop, he realized he was all alone.

"Anna?" he called. Then, with sudden, blinding panic, "**Anna!**"

He turned and hurtled back the way he'd come, taking left turns this time. Everything looked the same; it was impossible to tell if he was going the right way. He screamed her name until he had no voice left, and then just kept running. With each turn, the trails appeared to get more narrow, the corn leaning in around him.

Jeff sank to his knees and wept.

After her husband ran off like a spoiled child, Anna turned and went in the opposite direction. She also kept to the right, just as her father had always told her.

Three intersections later, she turned the corner and saw the exit in front of her. Happy families milled around the pumpkin patch ahead.

The farmer—now in a red-and-black flannel shirt—still sat between the entrance and exit. He jumped when she emerged.

"Lord, but you gave me a scare, Miss!" he said. "I didn't think there 'as anyone else in there!"

"There's not," Anna told him, and started for her car.

The End.



Russell C. Connor

Russell C. Connor has been writing horror since the age of five, and is the author of a short story collection, four eNovellas, and eight novels, the most recent of which is Director's Cut, Book 2 of The Box Office of Terror Trilogy. He has been a member of the DFW Writers' Workshop since 2006, and served as president for two years. He lives in Fort Worth, Texas with his rabid dogs, demented film collection, mistress of the dark, and demonspawn daughter. His next novel—Good Neighbors—will be available in 2015. Visit him at www.darkfilament.com or follow on Twitter @russellconnor.

GROUP THERAPY



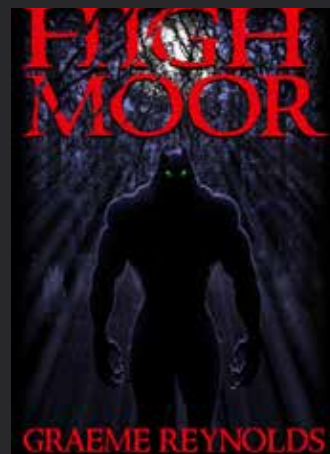
TOP 10 UK & US

We take a look at the best selling Kindle titles from the UK and US markets.



THE HOPE SPOT

R. Donald James Gauvreau delving into the topic of *Zombies*



REVIEWS

The team at gingernutsfhorror.com open their library to us.



THE VAMPIRE QUEEN

Another question is posed to our resident Vampire Queen.

Bestselling Horror US

1

The Vines - Christopher Rice

2

Revival: A Novel - Stephen King

3

Extinction Horizon - Nicholas Sansbury Smith

4

Silence: Part Two - AM Hudson

5

Pines - Blake Crouch

6

EPIC: Fourteen Books of Fantasy - Terah Edun

7

Lycan Fallout: Rise Of The Werewolf - Mark Tufo

8

The Last Passenger - Manel Loureiro

9

The Last Town - Blake Crouch

10

Wayward - Blake Crouch

Compiled January 1st - January 30th 2015
Amazon.com Kindle Chart

Bestselling Horror UK

1

Bloodstream - *Tess Gerritsen*

2

EPIC: Fourteen Books of Fantasy - *Terah Edun*

3

The Summer Man - *S.D. Perry*

4

Shepherd's Cross - *Mark White*

5

While the Savage Sleeps - *Andrew E. Kaufman*

6

San Francisco Night - *Stephen Leather*

7

Blood Reaction A Vampire Novel - *DL Atha*

8

World War Z - *Max Brooks*

9

The Last Passenger - *Manel Loureiro*

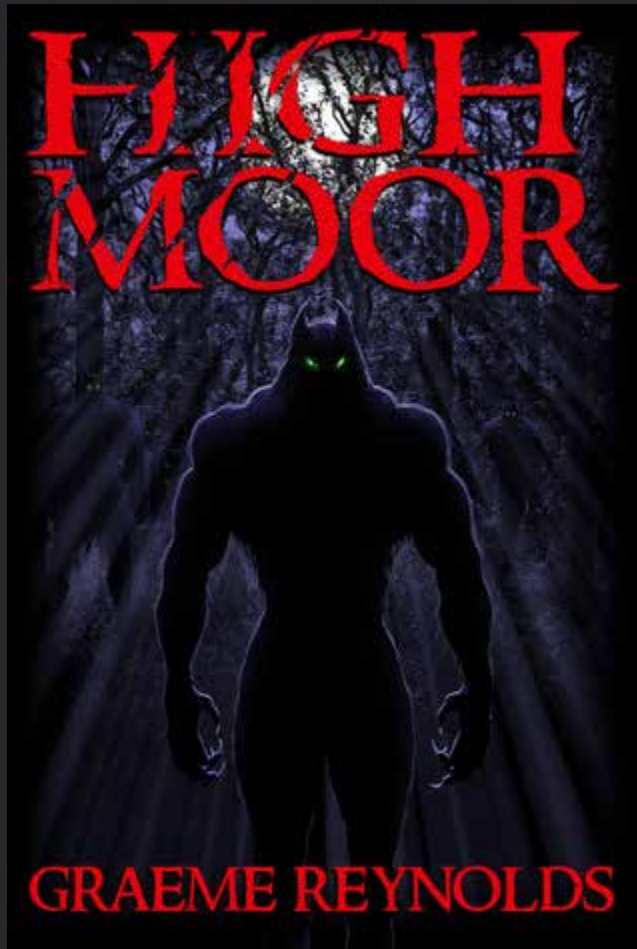
10

Lycan Fallout: Rise Of The Werewolf - *Mark Tufo*

Compiled January 1st -January 30th 2015
Amazon.co.uk Kindle Chart

HIGH MOOR

GRAEME MOORE - A REVIEW ■



High Moor is a complex, tightly plotted werewolf story, split between 1986 and the present day. The narrative follows a group of children living in the town of High Moor during what proves to be a very eventful summer, before pivoting to the here and now for the conclusion. The children of High Moor are incredibly well realised – well rounded, pleasingly un-PC and just the right side of amoral. The dialogue between them crackles with authenticity, and the characters of the different children are swiftly drawn with great skill. I found myself very quickly getting to know and like these kids – they felt very real, very unsentimental. This drew me in immediately, and when bad things inevitably started to happen, I felt invested in the outcome. BLOG_SUMMARY_END Reynolds also does an exceptional job with his action sequences (of which there are many). He has a talent for keeping the focus

where it needs to be – I found myself picturing these scenes as movies – and the horror is visceral and intense but never histrionic or overblown. Similarly, the plotting throughout is superb. There are times when the story reads almost as an action thriller, in that he has a genius for cutting away at a climactic point, which kept me keenly engaged. Again, it's testament to the plotting that this works as well as it does – even as I was impatient to get back to the cliffhanger, I was fascinated to see how the other characters were fairing. The story is dense, and the interweaving of the various characters plot lines is one of the strengths of the story. The werewolves themselves are also well written, with the descriptions of their point of view vivid and evocative. My only minor issue was an over-reliance on certain phrases during the transformation scenes, but once the beasts are mobile, the storytelling is superb. Overall, High Moor is a great read – well realised characters, exquisite plotting, and strong action horror. One note of warning though: The ending is a brutal cliffhanger that not only does not resolve the story but will leave me impatient for more. This is unambiguously the first book of a trilogy, so don't go in expecting resolution. Regarding the audio aspect, for the most part narrator Chris Barnes does a grand job. His Scottish accent is distinct but utterly clear – as someone who can struggle with thicker regional accents, I found the entire story totally intelligible. He has a powerful and seemingly instinctive sense of pacing, which allows the action sequences to flow without either becoming rushed or dragging. He also acquits himself well for the most part with the various regional accents of the characters, though he does struggle somewhat with the lone American character. There are also some subtle but deft audio techniques employed which

added to my absorption in the tale – a use of effect when characters talk on the phone or via walkie talkie gave an added verisimilitude to the telling of the story, without being intrusive or showy. Overall this audiobook was an immersive and captivating experience. Providing you know in advance this is only part one of a larger story, I would happily recommend this fine action horror novel.-

See more at: <http://gingernutsofhorror.com/4/post/2015/02/high-moor-by-graeme-reynolds-and-chris-barnes-audiobook-review.html#sthash.wDrRj52t.dpuf>

About Kit Power

Kit Power lives in Milton Keynes, England, and insists he's fine with that. His short fiction has been published by Burnt Offering Books and MonkeyKettle Books. A trio of thematically linked novella length tales 'The Loving Husband and the Faithful Wife' (plus short story 'The Debt') and 'Lifeline' are available in two volumes via Amazon now. His debut novel (currently called 'The God Issue', but that will hopefully change) is due out in Autumn 2014.

To stay up to date, check out his [Amazon author page](#). Those of you who enjoy near-professional levels of prevarication are invited to peruse his blog at <http://kitpowerwriter.blogspot.co.uk/>

When John Simpson hears of a bizarre animal attack in his old home town of High Moor, it stirs memories of a long forgotten horror. John knows the truth. A werewolf stalks the town once more, and on the night of the next full moon, the killing will begin again. He should know. He survived a werewolf attack in 1986, during the worst year of his life. It's 1986 and the town is gripped in terror after the mutilated corpse of a young boy is found in the woods. When Sergeant Steven Wilkinson begins an investigation, with the help of a specialist hunter, he soon realises that this is no ordinary animal attack. Werewolves are real, and the trail of bodies is just beginning, with young John and his friends smack in the middle of it.

Twenty years later, John returns to High Moor. The latest attack involved one of his childhood enemies, but there's more going on than meets the eye. The consequences of his past actions, the reappearance of an old flame and a dying man who will either save or damn him are the least of his problems. The night of the full moon is approaching and time is running out. But how can he hope to stop a werewolf, when every full moon he transforms into a bloodthirsty monster himself?

THE HOPE SPOT

What Zombies Mean

By R. Donald James Gauvreau ■

Welcome to part two of a three-part special on zombies and how to use them. Today I'm going to be letting other people do a lot of my talking for me, as we all discuss some of the different things that zombies can symbolize. In-between, I'll talk about how we might take some of these meanings and build around them the kind of zombie that might reinforce them.

From /tg/ on 4chan: "It's also of persecution against the survivor. Everyone is out to get you, to destroy you, with absolute irrational zeal. Your friends and loved ones also turn against you, familiar faces among the teeming, hateful masses turned against you simply for being... different from them."

As someone else replied: "You're the minority who haven't conformed to undeath, and are relentlessly hunted for being alive. Those that are captured or infected are forcibly turned, and some would rather take their own lives against the tide than become one. Society and infrastructure crumble because the mob is focusing exclusively on a single issue, for seemingly no purpose other than its complete and pointless eradication. Every single minute of existence in this world is fraught with danger, usually through being discovered."

Sometimes you can fake it just long enough to get through, but if you're found out, suddenly everyone is your enemy. You can make camp and hang out, but left in one place, you stagnate and die a slower, more agonizing death than by your own hand or that of the mob. Relative safety comes in the form of small communities far away, though sometimes the protective walls come down and the survivors are left to the merciless hands of the mob.

"I suddenly have a whole lot more respect for the zombie genre, even though I don't like zombies as much, because it's essentially putting you in the position of irrational persecution: just replace survivors with, I don't know, homosexuals, and zombies with conservatives... and it works as a great analogy."

Here's the kind of story where you want to make it possible for humans to masquerade as zombies. Maybe it's the smell of rotting, like in *The Walking Dead*. Maybe it's something in the way that they move and act, and so long as you shamle and moan

the zombies will think nothing of you— but you'd better eat what they eat too, because a zombie with a weak stomach isn't a zombie at all, and they'll know that something's wrong with a zombie that doesn't go for prey.

Acting like a zombie can't be healthy, though. There could certainly be physical effects, infection and the like, but the ones that I'd be most concerned with are psychological. You can pretend to be something for only so long before the mask becomes you, and does so kindly.

Elsewhere on /tg/, someone mentioned how, in a post-post-apocalyptic society, the zombie apocalypse could represent societal trauma, as "its lingering effects continue to mess things up and prevent society from healing."

Good old Science, incidentally, may have confirmed that many people are afraid of zombies because of political subtext. Zombies are the fear of the Republican Party, characterized as sexless, mindless, conformist, and terrifyingly evangelical.

Like the Borg, you will be assimilated. "Your culture will adapt to service us," they proclaim. "Resistance is futile." Except that zombies, and caricatured Republicans, have no need for your technological or cultural distinctiveness. They just want warm bodies. Despite that, however, Annalee Newitz tells us that you don't have to be on the Left in order for zombies to hit a nerve: "Republicans fear a revolt of the poor and disenfranchised, dressed in rags and coming to the White House to eat their brains."

Stephen Harper, in the essay *Zombies, Malls, and the Consumerism Debate*, talks about how zombies have represented everything from "cultural dupes" of consumerism, to the nagging existential dread that mindless consumerism is supposed to fight off, to "a lumpenproletariat of shifting significance, walking symbols of any oppressed social group," especially "in the literature and cinema of the twentieth century, in which zombies are synonymous with oppression and slavery."

Could the real monsters... be us? (cue the cliché klaxon) This is a harder idea to pull off, but what if you could make the zombies pitiable in some way? For example, what if the idea of a cure were not just the pipe dream

of the standard deluded farmer with a barn full of his zombie neighbors, but a proven fact? Unfortunately, it isn't accessible to our heroes just yet, so every zombie killed is a person who will never be cured.

As an extra horror, you can let the cured talk about how they haven't totally lost themselves in the zombification process. They've just lost control of their bodies, but they are still forced to bear witness to every bone-crunching act that their hungering bodies perform.

Maybe show things from the point of view of the zombies, too. Perhaps their psychology is changed, so that they think nothing of eating people but still have a strange kind of culture, effective enclaves, terrible in full-grown and hungry bodies. Yes, they might have to be shotgun'd and chainsaw'd to save your brains, but at least for me there's something sad about the necessity of killing thinking beings who, through no fault of their own, simply can't be reasoned with.

There's a difference between evil and insane, and I think that it's always a tragedy when the latter have to suffer.

You could even do both of these at once, though that would be more difficult to pull off. Perhaps they suffer from a kind of dissociative identity disorder, or maybe the original personality is an impotent observer to all that the new and dominant personality is doing.

From *This Book is Made of Spiders: Seriously, Don't Touch It*, by David Wong: "The zombie looks like a man, walks like a man, eats and otherwise functions fully, yet is devoid of the spark. It represents the nagging doubt that lays deep in the heart of even the most zealous believer: behind all of your pretty songs and stained glass, this is what you really are. Shambling meat. Our true fear of the zombie was never that its bite would turn us into one of them. Our fear is that we are already zombies.

Here's a zombie that doesn't need to bite you to grow the horde. Maybe there's something in the air now, and it's wearing at the mind (this could definitely work as a "living zombie," like out of *28 Days Later*). Or perhaps it's supernatural, and the weak are possessed or simply transmuted.

Regardless of the details, the zombification process starts in the mind, not the body. You give up, and then you turn into a zombie, having shed all your pretensions at being a higher kind of creature. Everyone is a zombie. Some people are just play-acting at being something more.

C. T. Phipps, author of *The Red Room* and *Cthulhu Apocalypse*, gave the standard one: "Everyone knows cheetahs are faster than human beings. So are a lot of animals. However, something I learned in college was human beings are actually much better at endurance

walks. So, when they caught up to their prey, they were fresh and the latter were dead tired. Zombies are much like this. Our hero can spend the entire movie running away from them but they, unlike their pursuers, have to catch their breath and sleep. The zombie is like death. You can escape it every day of your life but it will catch you.

Something else that this statement makes me think of is how zombies, more than being about death, can also be about putting us in the place of our prey. Zombies take us down through endurance hunting just like we used to do (and like the Kalahari, Raramuri, and others yet do).

I haven't yet come across a story that really plays up this element, of zombies beating us at our own game. Perhaps you'd like to research other ancient hunting methods, and suggest these to your zombies (what comes to mind off the bat is a group of zombies driving people to a cliff face, where some choose the yawning gap below rather than the jaws of the dead, but this idea could do with some tinkering).

Lastly, from George A. Romero himself: "Zombies don't represent anything in my mind except a global change of some kind. And the stories are about how people respond to or fail to respond to this. That's really all they've represented to me."

So yeah. Consider your themes.

Join me next month as we close this feature out with a few more questions to ask as you go about worldbuilding.

R. Donald James Gauvreau maintains a blog at www.whitemarbleblock.blogspot.com, where he regularly posts story ideas, free fiction, and other goodies, including a free guide to comparative mythology that was written specifically with worldbuilding in mind.

He is probably not a spider.

HADES HAS NO FURY – VENGEFUL WOMEN IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY

By Fran Jacobs and Clodia Metelli



IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY IT IS USUALLY the men who take centre stage. Male heroes, like Hercules, Perseus, Theseus and Odysseus are sent on quests, fight in wars, and slay the monsters. Women, meanwhile, are very often the reward for accomplishing those quests or booty won in the wars and the victims to be rescued from those monsters. While sometimes a heroine may help the hero in his adventure, the focus is on the achievement of the hero. Theseus was so grateful for Ariadne's crucial help in his defeat of the Minotaur, that he somehow forgot about her on the way home and left her stranded on an island!

When a woman is the centre of her own myth then it's usually as the victim of an amorous god, or mortal man's, attention, and one of two things tends to happen as a result of this; a new hero is born to the unwilling mother, or she manages to escape by being transformed, into a tree, a bird, or beast, sometimes both. Very rarely is she the master of her own destiny, but when a mythological heroine does take control, usually as a result of some wrong done to her or her family, then the result is bloody and violent.

Medea

Medea is one of the few women in ancient Greek mythology who consistently took control of her destiny, perhaps because she wasn't a native Greek but the daughter of Aeetes, King of Colchis, and also the grand-daughter of the sun god Helios.

When Jason came to Colchis, seeking the Golden Fleece to secure the throne of Iolchus, she helped him with the various tasks that her father set for him. When Jason finished the tasks, and took the fleece, Medea helped him escape by killing her own brother. In some versions of her myth, she dismembered her brother and scattered the pieces, so that her father and his men had to stop and collect them all for a proper burial. Medea continued to aid Jason on his voyage home and when they reached Iolchus, and King Pelias refused to give up his throne to Jason, Medea tricked his daughters into killing him by chopping him up and throwing him in a pot in an attempt to rejuvenate him. Medea and Jason then fled to Corinth, which is where she shows just how ruthless she can be, after Jason abandons her to marry the Corinthian king's daughter, Glaucé.

It is in Athenian playwright, Euripides' *Medea*, where the horror of her revenge is portrayed in graphic detail. At first Medea is just upset, crying on her bed, but when she hears that Creon, the Corinthian king is going to have her banished, her misery turns to a desire for revenge. She considers a violent approach, attacking her rival outright, but doesn't want her enemies to capture her and have the last laugh. So she turns to the one thing that has served her well in the past, magic, and anoints a crown and robe with poison and has her own sons take it to Glaucé in the pretence of it being a peacekeeping gift to let her sons stay and not be exiled with her. With convincing from Jason, Glaucé accepts the gifts and puts them on and within moments the poison takes effect. Glaucé changes colour, she staggers and shakes and:

"...the pupils of her eyes were twisted out of sight; the blood was drained from all her skin...the golden coronet around her head discharged a stream of unnatural devouring fire; while the fine dress... was eating her dear flesh." (Euripides *Medea* lines 1156-1168)

Soon she was unrecognisable to anyone but her father: "her eyes, her face, were one grotesque disfigurement. Down from her head dripped blood mingled with flame, her flesh...melted from the bare bone." And when her father goes to hold her, he becomes stuck fast, his own flesh pulling from his bones as he tries to pull away, until he, too, is dead.

But Medea's revenge doesn't end there. When Jason comes to confront her, he learns that she has murdered their children, just before she leaves, triumphant, in a chariot sent by her grandfather, the sun god.

Philomela and Procne

Another woman driven to desperate straits by her husband is Procne. She and her sister Philomela were daughters of King Pandion of Athens. King Pandion, wanting an alliance with Thrace, married his elder daughter Procne to King Tereus of Thrace. Tereus took his bride back to Thrace, where she bore the king a son, Itys.

After a few years of marriage, Procne begged her husband for a favour, that she might be allowed to see her little sister Philomela, either by returning home

herself, or Philomela being brought to Thrace on a visit. Tereus agreed that he would sail to Athens and ask King Pandion for permission to bring Philomela to Thrace. Permission was granted and Philomela was entrusted to Tereus' care. When they reached Thrace, Tereus dragged Philomela to a deserted hut in the middle of the woods and raped her.

Afterwards, Philomela tore at her hair in grief and denounced Tereus for breaking all natural bonds by raping his sister-in-law. She declared that she would tell everyone what a vile thing he had done and that the Gods themselves would be witness to his crime. Afraid of what would happen, Tereus bound the girl's hands behind her and drew his sword. Eager to die, Philomela bared her throat to him, but instead of killing her, however, Tereus brutally hacked out her tongue to prevent her from ever revealing what had happened.

"The mangled root quivers, while the severed tongue lies palpitating on the dark earth, faintly murmuring; and, as the severed tail of a mangled snake is wont to writhe, it twitches convulsively, and with its last dying movement it seeks its mistress's feet." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.557-560)

Leaving Philomela in the hut, Tereus returned to his palace where he greeted his wife Procne with the sad news that he had sailed to Athens only to learn that her sister was dead. Procne was grief-stricken and set up a monument to her sister and made offerings to her spirit.

Meanwhile, Philomela, alone in the hut with just a single servant sent to wait on her, was determined to reveal what had happened and get revenge. She wove the story of what had happened in a series of pictures, then, rolling up the cloth, she asked the servant by signs to present it to the queen. Seeing the tapestry, Procne was furious and also determined to get her revenge on her husband.

During the festival of Bacchus, when women traditionally left their homes and ran wild in the mountains and forests, Procne ran out into the woods and found the hut where her sister was held captive. She brought Philomela back to the palace in secret, where they butchered Procne's little son and cut his body into joints of meat, which they cooked and served up to Tereus that night for supper. Tereus enjoyed it so much that he called for his son Itys to come and join



him.

“He’s already here!” Procne responded gleefully, and Philomela burst through the door and flung Itys’ head into his face. Tereus sprang up from the table and lunged at the two women. As they fled from him, they were transformed into birds, Procne a swallow and Philomela a nightingale. As he pursued them, Tereus in turn was metamorphosed into a long-beaked hoopoe bird.

Hecuba

Unlike Medea and Procne, who are wronged by their husbands, Hecuba, Queen of Troy, finds herself wronged by the entire Greek army. Her city is destroyed, her sons are killed, her husband, Priam, is murdered in front of her, she is sold into slavery, and in Euripides’ plays, *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, her daughter, Polyxena is sacrificed on the grave of Achilles. But it is when her remaining son, Polydorus, is murdered by Polymestor, a family friend who had been looking after the boy since the start of the war, that she is pushed over the edge. Helpless against the entire Greek army and somewhat accepting of her fate as a slave, it is only Polymestor that Hecuba seeks revenge on. With the help of the other slaves, she lures Polymestor in with stories of gold being buried under Troy’s remains, takes him into a tent with the other women, distract him so they can separate him from his and:

“...suddenly, in the midst of all this gentle talk...they whipped out daggers from their clothes and stabbed my sons. Some of them fell on my arms and legs...they held me down by my hair... At last... they did a ghastly thing: They took their brooches, and they stabbed and tore my eyes-” (Euripides *Hecuba* 1160-1198)

Hecuba argues her motives to Agamemnon, leader of the Greek army, convincing him that Polymestor had killed her son, a guest, for gold, and Agamemnon declares Polymestor’s fate just. But, like Philomela, Hecuba doesn’t get away with her actions. Polymestor tells her that she will be transformed into a dog, with glowing tawny eyes, and die, and that Cassandra, one of her two remaining daughters, will also be killed along with Agamemnon. Furious, Agamemnon orders that Polymestor be abandoned on an island and tells Hecuba to bury her children, before they set sail.

Clytemnestra and Cassandra

Even before the Trojan war had begun, Agamemnon had blood on his hands. He had sacrificed his own daughter, Iphigeneia, to the goddess Artemis for favourable winds so that they could sail for Troy

to reclaim Agamemnon’s sister-in-law, Helen. Ten years later he returns victorious, with Cassandra the Trojan princess and prophetess as his concubine, and his wife, Clytemnestra is ready to take her revenge. She persuades Agamemnon to enter the palace by walking on a precious tapestry of dyed red cloth but Cassandra ignores Clytemnestra’s instruction for her to come in and stays outside. She can see the ghosts of the dead:

“Those children weeping for their own blood, for their own tender flesh, that cruel nameless dish from which their father fed.” Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1085-1107

Victims of the earlier rivalry between Agamemnon’s father, Atreus, and uncle, Thyestes, which had led to Atreus killing his own nephews and serving them up to Thyestes, their father for supper. And Cassandra can see the future, her own death at the hands of Clytemnestra, after Clytemnestra has murdered Agamemnon in a bath tub, caught in a net like an animal. But, the Chorus, who are present through Cassandra’s revelations do not understand her. She is the original harbinger, a character that features frequently in modern horror films, either to warn the protagonists of exactly what is to come, such as Jezelle Hartman in *Jeepers Creepers*, or to tell them what has already happened in a place, hinting at the future horror, something which was mocked so brilliantly in Joss Whedon’s *Cabin in the Woods*. Unlike her future incarnations, Cassandra embraces her fate and walks into the palace. Immediately terrible cries are heard from within as Cassandra’s prophecies are fulfilled. Years later, Clytemnestra will be murdered by her own son Orestes, in vengeance for the death of his father.

Conclusion

Ancient Greece was a very patriarchal civilisation and women were expected to subordinate themselves to their husbands and fathers who were in turn expected to provide for and protect them. In that way the violent and assertive actions of these women can be seen as monstrous and unnatural, which is often how other, male, characters refer to them. This is confirmed by the fact that these women often mutate into something other than human, or, in the case of Clytemnestra, suffer the fate of being killed by her own child – another unnatural end.

But, in each of these situations the women has been driven to take her revenge because a man has crossed a line and failed to uphold his end of the patriarchal

bargain.

By leaving her home of Colchis to follow Jason, Medea effectively cut herself off from the protection of her father and brothers. By abandoning Medea for a new wife, Jason was effectively leaving her alone in the world, without male protection and far from home, a very difficult and dangerous position for a woman to be in. Medea's horrific attack upon Jason's wife, father-in-law and children is her response to his own betrayal of the obligations of marriage and family. Similarly, Tereus' rape of Procne's sister, when their father had placed her under his protection; Polymestor's betrayal of Hecuba's son, after he had sworn to protect him; and Agamemnon's murder of Clytemnestra's daughter are all examples of men who break their agreement to protect the women and their children to whom they have obligations.

So, while these stories can be seen as misogynist exemplars of women as monstrous and untrustworthy, they could also have served as a warning to men that although women may seem weak and helpless, betraying and harming them could invoke terrible consequences.

Sources

Euripides Medea and Hecuba
Aeschylus The Oresteia
Ovid Metamorphoses VI

BIO

Fran Jacobs is a fantasy and horror writer, author of the fantasy series, Ellenessia's Curse (the Shadow Seer, Seer's Tower) and two short story collections: the Rules of War and Other Stories, a collection of her previously published short stories; and the Child-Eaters' Society and Other Stories, which is a new collection of horror tales inspired by the Greek myths. She has a Masters Degree in Ancient History, a passion for zombies, the 80s, cats and cake. She currently lives in Swansea, South Wales, with her three cats, Megaera, Claudia and new addition, Captain Malcom Kitty Reynolds, adopted at the recent death of her beloved Mr Kitty, where she writes full time, crafts 'unusual' jewellery, drinks too much coffee and works on becoming a crazy cat lady.

You can learn more about her writing on her website: www.franjacobs.com/

And follow her on facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Fran-Jacobs/20371511691>

and see her jewellery at: <https://www.facebook.com/megaerasrealm>

Clodia Metelli has spent many years studying the ancient world and has an MA and a PhD to show for it. She is now a writer of historical fiction set in ancient Rome, often with a gay romantic theme. Clodia now lives by the sea with her boyfriend and a small black cat called Achilles.

<https://clodiametelli.wordpress.com/>

EXPLORING THE DARKER SIDE OUR FEARS:

Monica J. O'Rourke: Female Author's and Extreme Fiction

By Noah C. Patterson ■

THE SUB-GENRE OF EXTREME HORROR (better known as splatterpunk) is often considered to be a man's genre. Male authors make up the majority of writers who pen in this genre, and their stories often involve graphic rape, mutilation, and torture—all themes that women are stereotypically adverse to. Well, one female author has shown that women can in fact write extremely effective splatterpunk fiction. That author is Monica J. O'Rourke.

Wrath James White, author of such disgusting tales as *Like Porno for Psychos* and *The Book of a Thousand Sins*, said the following of O'Rourke's work, "Forget all the preconceived biases and judgments you may have about how women write horror. They won't do you any good here." White himself admitted to being surprised by O'Rourke's work.

White later approached O'Rourke to write a novel together, *Poisoning Eros*, a book she still says is the favorite that she has written. Additionally, O'Rourke still acts as White's editor. White sought out O'Rourke after reading a short story she had written concerning sex crimes on a fat farm and yet still expected her, as a female author, to soften him up a bit. Needless to say, he was wrong in that regard.

O'Rourke, like many authors, got into writing when she was very young (five to be exact), and she began writing in the horror genre when she was twelve. "My paternal grandmother loved everything horror," says O'Rourke, "including terrible old B-movies, which we would watch together. She would lend me her paperbacks, so at age ten I started reading books like *Jaws*, *The Exorcist*, *Amityville Horror*, *Flowers in the Attic*. She was a strong influence. Then again she loved "midget wrestling," so go figure."

O'Rourke started writing splatterpunk later on in her career, and it seems it was almost by accident that she stumbled upon the genre. In 1998 she wrote a story titled "An Experiment in Human Nature," which involved gag worthy scenes of torture and disturbing imagery. O'Rourke says she was trying to emulate the dark style of horror master Clive Barker who is known as one of the leading authors of splatterpunk and has written such classics as *The Hellbound Heart* and *Weaveworld*. After that she desired to push the envelope in horror fiction and see how far she could go. That was when a publisher approached her about

writing the most extreme thing I could come up with. That story is her controversial and violent novel *Suffer the Flesh*.

However, elements of an extreme nature can't stand alone in a good story. O'Rourke says she made a lot of mistakes in her rookie years as an author of extreme fiction. "You need characters readers can relate to and root for. You need a plot that makes sense. That's lacking in much of the splatterpunk I read these days." O'Rourke believes that even splatterpunk has a place in our literary libraries if it is simply done correctly. A properly developed plot, a good set of characters, and deep human themes can help any work of extreme fiction "transcend its stereotype." As far as her gender is concerned, O'Rourke was surprised by the positive and welcoming reactions that others had towards her choice to write extreme fiction. Many readers of the genre were surprised, and excited, to learn the author of the stories they were reading was female.

Of course, O'Rourke received some criticism, but rarely was it about her gender. The criticism was often of the genre as a whole and how many critics believe it simply shouldn't exist. O'Rourke says the only "sexism" she has even remotely experienced in her time as an author is that she rarely receives invitations to write for horror anthologies. Most often when a reader looks into any anthology of horror the listed authors are all men and maybe one or two women on occasion.

O'Rourke states that "The one exception I have to mention is the immeasurably talented John Skipp, who sent me invite after invite to submit to his anthologies, and for some bizarre reason I kept sending him utter dreck. I didn't do it on purpose; I realized it in retrospect. I think I was so taken aback by the invites that I wrote the stories very quickly and didn't properly edit them."

Ultimately, O'Rourke believes that being female doesn't and shouldn't affect the dark topics she chooses to write about and feels that others should treat her writing likewise. "If you're writing on those topics, regardless of your gender, you have to handle them with respect. Gratuitous sex and violence is just wrong, and it pulls me right out of a story. If the story is about a rape, for example, having the victim enjoy it is just wrong (unless the story's about the victim's bizarre reaction to sexual violence)."

O'Rourke believes that shock and horror can be evoked without the blatantly harsh elements that many expect from splatterpunk. A story can still be splatterpunk, can still be just as horrific and disturbing, without the explicit details. Ultimately, it seems to be up to the author when a scene necessitates all the gory details and when it would be better suited to the reader's own diabolical imagination. According to O'Rourke, "even a subtle shock is a shock, perhaps not all on your face. But it's there."

Writing extreme horror for O'Rourke, as with many horror authors, works as a type of catharsis, an inner therapy. She says some of her greatest fears involve forced captivity, torture, and—perhaps most of all—serial killers. These elements thus appear in her own work on a frequent basis. But, as for many of us, the most terrifying thing may possibly be the dark side of human nature. What horrible deeds are we capable of and what would push us to act on those desires?

And while O'Rourke may occasional have supernatural elements in her stories she ultimately focuses on the humanity behind the characters. And, in the end, that seems to be the key to success in fiction—be it splatterpunk or not.

Having read her work myself, and having discussed ideas and themes with O'Rourke, I can see the brilliance in her words. I am far more disturbed by her work, rather than disgusted as often I am with authors such as Edward Lee and Jack Ketchum (who are both brilliant writers whose work I still often enjoy). Monica doesn't

write like a man, neither does she write like a woman. She writes like a damn good horror author, pure and simple. She is proof positive that women have a roll in extreme horror fiction—and in horror in general—and that, sometimes, it is the simplest things that scare us the most, the things that are rooted in our deep human psyche.

If you are interested in reading Monica J. O'Rourke's work you can pick up her books from Deadite Press at <http://deaditepress.com/> and Sinister Grin Press at <http://sinistergrinpress.com/>.



GRAVEYARD CALLING

HORROR RECORDS



SPOOKY MUSIC ON CASSETTE & DIGITAL!

**SPOOKALELE! HAUNT MUSIC! HORRORPUNK!
GRUESOME GUITARS! SPOOKY SYNTHWAVE!
HORRORCHESTRA! DARKPSY! PSYCHOBILLY!**

WWW.GRAVEYARDCALLING.CO.UK

FOR 10% OFF, ENTER CODE: SANITARIUM AT CHECKOUT!



What is a female historical figure that's another reason that inspired the vampire legend?

- Ron, GA

Thank you for your question. Fortunately, there was a woman who fits your exact description. Elizabeth Bathory was that woman. She lived from 1560-1614 and was known for drinking and bathing in young female virgin blood.

It all started when she had a male suitor, while she was married and her husband was away in the military. She saw an old hag and asked the suitor what he thought. He made some distasteful comment and she vowed never to get old. It was said that she developed a taste for blood when a young servant girl was brushing her hair and pulled on it. Elizabeth struck the girl so hard with something that she drew blood. She took the blood from the girl and put it on her tongue and face, convinced that virgin blood would keep her young. She would take the virgin girls from the villages surrounding her husbands' castle, torture them and finally kill them drinking and bathing in their blood. Her husband, on rare returns to the castle, would show her new torture techniques for the young girls. After her husbands' death, Elizabeth took on two lady friends at different times which helped her procure virgins. The last one, with a scarceness of virgins, convinced her to take a noble girl and when she was killed it was stated she committed suicide.

This led to the arrest of Elizabeth. She had two trials. She was arrested in December 1610 and was on trial a few days later but there was no evidence. A week later, she was on trial again, this time with evidence. A register was found in her sleeping quarters, written in her handwriting, of over 650 young girls she killed. She was sentenced to her castle in Vienna where there was no light and she was only given only a slot for air and food. She died there three years later. The records of her life and trial were sealed by the government as they didn't want her deeds were a source of embarrassment for the Hungarian government.

It wasn't until 100 years later that a Jesuit priest, Laszlo Turoczy found the original documents and after talking to the locals wrote a book about the life of Elizabeth Bathory in the 1720's at the height of vampire scares. Her story has been embellished upon ever since.

Please visit my website for more information:

<http://www.thevampirequeen1.weebly.com>

Silent Studios Productions
presents

INFECTED

DEAD SILENT PUBLISHING PRESENTS A SILENT STUDIOS PRODUCTION A FILM BY JASON WRIGHT
"INFECTED" DARREN KENT ROSIE PEARSON DIRECTED BY JASON WRIGHT
RIOT POLICE AND WEAPONS FROM UWE MUSIC BY KEN HAMPTON SFX EFFECTS LEAD BY DEAD GORY SFX
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR KIRSTY RICHARDSON DIALOGUE BY JEZ HELLION

18

STRONGLY CAUTIONED

some material is inappropriate for persons under the age of 18

DO NOT COPY

DDP



Something Sweet

Gillian French

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29



CASE #15028

Something Sweet

By Gillian French

I TOOK THE JOB BECAUSE I NEEDED IT, NOT TO PIG OUT, like everybody said. Fat girl becomes ice cream pusher for Swirl Top Frozen Novelties; sounds like the lead-in to a bad joke. I'd packed on the freshman fifteen—hell, call it twenty-three and shame the devil—at Beal that year. Being an O'Fallon, I'd always known that if I wanted to go to college, I'd have to pay my own way. There were five of us kids and Dad cleaned carpets for a living. When Swirl Top posted an ad for drivers in the campus common at the end of spring semester, I gave them a call. They gave me a pink company shirt and the Maplewood route.

My truck played **Pop Goes the Weasel** and burned oil. I punched in at the Swirl Top plant on upper Broadway five days a week and blue-smoked my way over to Maplewood, a lower-to-middle-class 'burb. I was taking a summer bio course and brought my textbook along to study in my downtime, keeping a weight-loss shake within easy reach.

Each day, the Maplewood kids shot off their postage-stamp lawns, bills clenched in their upraised fists as if the rumor was that I'd floor it if I couldn't see the color of their money from fifty yards. Not so. Understand, the O'Fallon Five used to be a sextet: I had a younger brother who was hit by a car in front of our house when I was ten. I was in the side yard at the time, fighting with my sister Hannah. I remember a screech of brakes, followed by a silence so sharp it could wound. Over those seconds, Brandon was thrown twenty feet and bounced the back of his seven-year-old skull off the pavement. The bleeding in his brain was torrential, a deluge. He died in the hospital that night. After that, there was nobody left to tag along behind me. So, yeah. You better believe I drove that truck slow.

Maplewood was a mob scene even on rainy days, but Oak, the next street over, was more sedate. Less kids, less money. But it was on Oak that I met the boy with silver dollars in his pockets and a gardenia in his buttonhole.

It was nearly three on a Saturday afternoon. My stomach was growling and my diet shake was long gone. It may have tasted like paint thinner, but it was all I allowed myself. By hook,

crook, or starvation, I would lose five pounds for Dad's July Fourth picnic and Hannah could sit on *that*.

As I trundled down Oak, a group of kids came around the corner. I cranked up the **Weasel** and they came on the run, all boys around the age of ten, jostling and joking, screwing up their addition and needing me to straighten out their change. By the time they'd left with their push-up pops and éclair bars, only one boy remained.

He'd waited patiently behind the others, standing where the grass turned to sidewalk. He looked to be the same age as the other boys, but lankier, with shaggy dark hair parted on the side so it flopped into his eyes. He stepped up to the window, hands clasped behind his back, and said, "One Double-Decker Delight, please."

I said, "Sure thing," then worked my way back into the cramped freezer area. The Double-Decker was the most expensive treat we carried, a disc of vanilla ice cream sandwiched between two chocolate-chip cookies. I told him the damage and the boy put out one hand, revealing two gleaming Susan B. Anthony silver dollars.

"So you're the one," I said, making change. There had been silver dollars in the drawer each day that week, but whenever I tried to remember who'd paid with them, all I could see was a haze of eager faces and straining hands. "These babies are rare, you know."

The boy continued to grin. He wore Chuck Taylors, cargo pants, and a white dinner jacket too large for him with the sleeves pushed up to his elbows. A red gardenia sagged from the buttonhole. No way had the kid added that touch; his mom must've put it there. He said, "Who ever heard of an ice cream **w**oman?" in a big, warm voice like a game show host's.

"Well . . . you and me, I guess." I gave him his ice cream. "Thank you."

He made a comical, bug-eyed expression, as if the Double-Decker was the biggest thing he'd ever seen. "No. Thank you!" He walked off down the sidewalk, head bent over the ice cream sandwich, not eating it, merely gazing at it, as I jangled away down Oak and beyond.

I nicknamed him Silver, privately, and he never disappointed me: once a week, there he'd be, standing somewhere on Oak with his hands twined behind his back, waiting. He always made a very adult remark, like, "It's been awfully dry lately," or, "How's business?" And he always bought a Double-Decker using two silver dollars. It occurred to me that I'd handled more silver dollars in the past weeks than I had in my entire life.

"What'd you do, knock over Fort Knox?" I finally said.

Silver laughed, tilting his head so far back that I could see his molars. "No!" His blue-gray eyes settled on mine with giddy fascination. "Granny gives them to me. She says that every good boy deserves something sweet, so he'll keep his sweet disposition."

"Cool granny. Does she live around here?"

He paused, full stop. I wondered if he thought I was trying to be funny with that cool granny stuff. "Yes," he finally said.

He didn't take his ice cream from my outstretched hand. "Here." I wagged it. He grabbed it and tore across the lawn, knobby knees pumping. As I stared, he disappeared between two houses, shoving the Double-Decker into his mouth as if he was afraid somebody might take it away from him.

I didn't see him at all the next week. The Fourth of July arrived, and I sat down at the peeling picnic table in Dad's backyard only three-and-a-half pounds lighter than I'd been when summer began. Dad said, "Good to see ya, Casey," and kissed my cheek.

Jason and Ethan and Ryan were there, goofing and filling their plates. Hannah, slim and cool in a sleeveless summer dress, made a show of helping Dad with last minute things. Sitting next to her, I looked like the Hindenburg before it blew.

The boys were about to mow down when Dad cleared his throat and lifted his beer. "To Brand-O. Miss you, little buddy."

We all mumbled something and drank. Out of nowhere, I was hit with a memory of the red snowsuit he wore, a day of blinding sunlight in the searing cold, runny noses, cocoa after. Hannah stared off.

Over lunch, everybody made small talk. "So," Hannah finally said to me, smoothing her dress over her knee. "Ice cream, huh. Dad told me." Her expression was deliberately bland. "You

must be in heaven.”

“Right, Han. I’m my own best customer.”

“Wow. Defensive much?” When I shrugged, gnawing a celery stick, she sighed. “I mean, what’s it **like**? Tell me.”

I started with the basics, but before I knew it, I was talking about Silver. I hadn’t realized how much it bothered me, not seeing him this week. I told her how odd and charming he was, like no other kid on the route. “I don’t know what I said to drive him away.” I tossed the celery, half-chewed, onto my plate. “What if he doesn’t come back?”

Hannah blinked at me, expression pinched, as if I’d been explaining complex equations. “Well. No skin off your ass,” she said.

I thought about slapping her. I thought about the day Brandon was killed, of Hannah and me pulling the doll back and forth. “**It’s mine!**” I thought about that long, slow, hollow sensation, my insides falling free of my body as I rounded the house and saw Brandon’s Sox cap in the street, then his head, his fragile, ruined head, and all that blood. And Hannah behind me, staring, still holding the doll. Triumphant.

Silver was back on Monday. I was embarrassed by the relief I felt. I cut the **Weasel** and parked. Hands clasped behind his back, he took one long, clownish step to reach the window. He wore a fresh gardenia.

“Let me guess.” I smiled. “Double-Decker, straight up.”

“No olive.” I laughed, surprised, and he beamed. When I turned back from the freezer, I found him looking at my diet shake can.

“You don’t need that stuff,” he said. “You’re pretty. You remind me of”—he twisted up his face in thought—“a great big pink peony flower.”

“Uh, great. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he said richly. His parents must make him practice this stuff in front of a mirror, I thought.

The wandering pack of boys came around the corner again, laughing and shouting. Silver squinted at them as he bought his ice cream, and then walked away without another word. “Bye,” I called, my voice sounding hollow.

When the other boys arrived, I couldn’t help myself. “Any of you know that kid?” I said, pointing to Silver as he disappeared around the corner.

“He’s weird,” one of them said.

I’d expected that; God forbid anybody be a little different. “Weird how?”

Shrugs all around. “I caught him going through our trash one time,” said oldest boy. “I brought a bag out one night and he was digging through the can. I yelled for my mom and he ran away.”

I gave him a look. “For real?”

“I think he’s homeschooled,” he said.

Well, that explained it.

Once they’d headed home, I picked up the coins Silver had paid with. One silver dollar, one fifty-cent piece with JFK’s profile on it, and a silver coin I’d never seen before. There was a picture of a woman wearing a winged crown on one side, and what looked like a scroll and an olive branch on the other. Worth ten-cents, U.S. currency, liberty, in God we trust.

I swapped it for a regular dime from my purse and brought it home with me.

Both of my roommates were out, so I could actually hear myself think as I researched online. It didn’t take long to find the Mercury dime, also known as the Winged Liberty Head dime. Minted from 1916 to 1945. Rare. Not something granny would be handing out for treat money. Maybe some relative had left Silver a coin collection and he was spending through it without his parents knowing. Had he really been caught digging in somebody’s garbage can, scavenging? Stymied, I checked Facebook—Hannah and friends wearing tank-tops and glittery eye shadow: “**Girls night!**”—and then switched off the lamp.

In the morning, I decided to act. Sure, maybe it was none of my business. I was less than nobody to the kid, not a teacher or a babysitter or even a neighbor. But it felt wrong to take these coins. Maybe his parents had planned to cash them in when he was ready for college or something. **Plus**, a smug little voice whispered, **you want to see where he lives. You want to meet**

his folks and make sure he's not living on Double-Deckers and dumpster dinners alone. You want to be nosy.

I blew off my bio lab and drove over to Oak in my beat-up lemon. I didn't know how I expected to find him. The prefab houses were all run-down, the lawns scrubby and yellowed. Most people were at work, and the neighborhood had a hushed, forgotten feeling.

I drove the loop twice, and then continued to the next street, Birch Crest. This wasn't Swirl Top territory. The houses here had a featureless, long-faced look. Drug store flyers blew across yards.

There was one house with an empty clothesline that drew my attention. There was a decorative bear in the yard, about five-and-a-half feet tall, cut from a single sheet of plywood and painted brown with a small, white eye. The bear's snout had been broken off. A row of splinters remained. I slowed to a stop and looked at the overgrown garden the bear stood in. Red gardenias.

I parked and walked through the overgrown yard and up the steps. There were three mailboxes nailed to the siding. **Meyer, Lipchitz, Howard**. I knocked and waited. Knocked and waited.

As I stood on the top step, I noticed a beaten path leading around the side of the house, probably to the back door. I followed the path, ready to put on a friendly face in case somebody popped up wanting to know what I was doing on their property.

There was a TV playing somewhere inside, what sounded like a soap opera. I reached the back door, knocked. Nothing. "Hello?" I called.

No dice. I headed back the way I came. But now there was a low window open, basement level. It had been closed before. Heavy curtains and a shade flapped in the breeze. "Silver?" I realized that he had no reason to answer to that name. "It's me, Casey. The ice cream woman?"

I nudged the curtains aside and looked in. The basement was furnished. There was a door straight ahead, probably opening to a set of stairs to the first floor. A doorway to the left opened to what looked like a bedroom. I could see the edge of a bed, a faded comforter. The TV was in there, an old wooden console unit, melodramatic music swelling and receding.

"Here," I heard his voice, strangely quiet. "Down **here**."

"Can you let me in?"

"Window." I still couldn't see him. "It's how I go."

"I can't climb in your window. Come on, I need to talk to your mom for a minute."

A long pause. "I can't."

I sighed, peering down. "Why not?" There was a bed stand positioned under the window, obviously there to make it easier for him to climb in and out. Why would a kid need a set-up like this? "Hey. You there?" A knot tightened in my stomach. "Why can't you come to the door? He didn't answer. "Are you okay? Say something." What if the kid was chained to a radiator or tied to the bed or locked in a closet?

I slid through the opening, stepping down onto the concrete floor. It smelled strange.

I walked towards the bedroom. On the TV, a woman in white furs sat at a restaurant table strewn with martini glasses, saying, "I told you no, Marco. I want nothing more to do with your schemes." I caught sight of the top of Silver's dark head beyond the foot of the bed. He was sitting cross-legged with his back to me, watching TV.

He turned suddenly and giggled, all smiles and bright eyes. "Got you! I knew you'd come." He bounced and patted the rug beside him. "Come on. My show's just getting good."

I stopped in the doorway and looked down at the bed. There was something tucked under the covers. It had been a woman once. The nightgown was brown and soaked with bodily juices, but the flower pattern was still visible. She'd been here rotting a long time, long enough for the air to cure her, turning her decaying flesh to tough brown jerky. Her face had wizened over her skull, and the way she laid beneath the covers, head thrust back against the pillow, made her seem to be gagging, jaw ajar.

I stumbled back against the door. I couldn't look away. She had no eyes. Silver looked at me, then the corpse, and then bounced again where he sat. "I told you about my Granny. She likes me to have something sweet. Come sit and **shhh**. I want to hear my show."

I yelled and ran from the room. The door to the stairway opened. A shotgun barrel nosed

into the room, followed by an immense pale walrus of a man, his hair rising in wisps from his scalp, his eyes wide and burning. I screamed. He bellowed back and fired.

The shot filled the entire basement, and I figured I was dead, but it was the bed stand that took the hit. The recoil sent him stumbling into the edge of the door with a grunt and plopping down onto his butt. Still screaming, I ran, stepping on him and propelling myself up the stairs.

On my flight, I glimpsed a filthy packrats' hole, sticky aged spaghetti dishes, stacked newspapers, dirty clothes. Another TV babbling. The front door had four locks on it, which I yanked open with hardly a glance. I still have dreams where I can't open those locks, where time drags as I watch my clumsy hands fumble, and then the skin prickles on my neck as two cold barrels rest there.

Then I was out, dashing down the steps, hearing Silver shouting from somewhere, "No, Daddy! No! She's mine, Daddy! Don't!"

The cops found another corpse in a second floor bedroom, tucked into bed as neatly as Ms. Ruth Howard had been. The second body was identified as Mr. Llewellyn Lipchitz. Both people had been very elderly, living off social security, unable to care for themselves with no family to take them in. No doubt when they read the newspaper ad run by Clarence Meyer, Silver's father, a registered nurse offering in-home care, it had sounded like the answer. It had meant their deaths. Their murders were beyond simple. He simply hadn't fed them until they died. Apparently their corpses were strictly ornamental.

The social security checks, however, kept on coming in the mail, and Clarence Meyer kept right on cashing them. I suppose you could say it was a living.

Hard to keep the boy in check, though. Silver was indeed homeschooled, friendless, keeping company with a dead woman and pilfering her shoebox coin collection for a weekly ice cream whenever he could sneak out of the house. He pilfered his jackets from Mr. Lipchitz's closet. The soap operas were his life.

After the flap with the cops and the press, Swirl Top gave me my walking papers. Tony, my supervisor, who I had met only once, sagged over the desk, his expression pained, as though I'd betrayed some deep mutual trust. "What the Christ possessed ya? Want to tell me that? Why'd ya go to that house in the first damn place?"

I thought about it. "I couldn't have him on my conscience. There isn't room." Tony looked at me like I was speaking Japanese and told me they'd mail me my last paycheck.

Hell, no big loss—fall semester was only a month away, and I could probably get my job back at the campus commons, slopping corned beef and mashed potatoes onto plastic trays. As for my diet, I kicked the scale behind the bathroom door and haven't touched it since. Let Hannah sit on *that*.

The End.



Gillian French

Gillian French holds a Bachelors Degree in English from the University of Maine. Her contest wins include Second Place in the Genre Short Story category of the 2013 Annual Writer's Digest Writing Competition, First Place in the Horror category of the 2012 Writer's Digest Popular Fiction Awards Competition, and Third Prize in the 2012 Zoetrope: All-Story Short Fiction Contest. Her fiction has also appeared in *The Realm Beyond*, *The Aputamkon Review*, and other collections. She lives in Maine with her husband Darren and their son Jeremy.



The Red Curtain

Mitch Sebourn

Physician: Dr. Peterson
8268-WCT29





CASE #55451

The Red Curtain

By Mitch Sebourn

I STEPPED OUT FOR A BREAK AND SAW AN ODD YOUNG MAN standing on the curb, his head craned back like he was looking up at the Eiffel Tower. The kid was dressed in wrinkled khakis and a black fleece jacket with oversized buttons. He had the jacket pulled tightly around him, maybe thinking it would snow soon, despite the unseasonably warm air that had been hanging over the entire American south for the past week and a half.

When he lowered his gaze, I told him it was twelve. The Dalton Building was twelve stories of unremarkable Little Rock lawyers and insurance agents.

He scowled, then stepped past me and entered the building.

I mentioned him to my friend Alexis Norcolm, a fellow sixth floor attorney who'd mentored me during my first year of practice despite being three years younger than me. But then, Alexis hadn't waited till she was thirty to go to law school, and she'd accomplished more at the age of thirty-one than I'd ever know.

And yes, she knew the kid with the black jacket and unfriendly face. He was, she said, a law student whose name was Landon, and he indeed wore a scowl all the time. He'd clerked for her back in December. For five days.

"He didn't like the showing up part," she said. "I don't know why I hired him. He was a lousy interview. I suspect he's working for one of those third floor guys. Ron, probably. Perfect fit."

We'd gone for coffee at the Starbucks next to the trolley stop and were nearly back to the Dalton Building. We could have pursued the Landon or Ron conversations much, much further, but both of us supposedly had very busy afternoons awaiting us.

"Have a good afternoon, Everett," she said, once the elevator dinged open on the sixth floor. "Maybe I'll see you tonight?"

Busy be damned.

I didn't do anything when I made it back to my office.

I hadn't planned for this laziness, it simply happened, because it could.

The doing nothing started when I sat down at my desk and pondered the idea of locking the door and taking a nap. But that was too extreme. I could not justify dozing off in my office in the middle of what **should** have been an extremely busy afternoon. So I leaned forward, toward my computer, thinking a wave of enthusiasm would emanate from the monitor.

I went to ESPN.com, a message board, and finally, to Twitter.

Like me, someone was #feelingtired. Nine inches of snow in Boston. If you need a good #thriller, check out this particular Dan Brown knockoff, better than all the others. #DeflateGate. Traffic moving slowly on I-40. Ghost or prank? #CatPics. See my half-eaten banana pudding? And then, a link to an article about the northern lights.

I clicked it.

Prepare for a great light show tonight, the source material said, as far south as Arkansas and the Carolinas. Very, very rare, light shows of this magnitude, especially ones that extend this far south.

I'd seen the aurora borealis once, while visiting friends in Minnesota. But I'd never, until now, heard of the phenomenon being visible this far south. I made a note to watch for the display. Tonight, luckily, was supposed to be clear and cool.

Later, as I was taking the elevator down to the lobby, I sent Alexis a text message, asking her if she'd like to join me later for a beer at Gordon's Pub. Gordon's was right on the river, and certain window seats offered excellent views of the northern sky. And so, I noted, there would hopefully be beer **and** lights.

She replied that she unfortunately had a very bad headache... but how was she supposed to pass up such an opportunity?

I told her I'd pick her up, if she liked, and she said that would be fine.

"Northern lights," she said as we sat down at a table by the window. "Here."

"So they say."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

I reminded her that she was a lawyer with a headache. Of course she'd say that.

The server came and we requested a round of the house brew.

"I saw Ron on my way out," she said. "He didn't hire Landon. Didn't know him."

"There are several lawyers in our building."

We moved on from Landon, but only temporarily. We talked about work, mutual friends, the city, movies, books... and eventually, sometime amidst round number three, we returned to him.

"You hired him because you pitied him," I said.

"Everett, he told me once that he'd driven all the way to North Dakota to talk to his dad. Two days before, he'd said his dad's dead. He's crazy."

"Likely." I winked at her and sipped my beer.

"I find it concerning," she said. "Him being at the Dalton Building. I don't like it."

I think I shrugged, and then there was a minor commotion, and we—nearly everybody in the pub, all of perhaps ten people—realized that the entire northern sky had become a wavering red curtain. The lights were reflected in the river. The trees and ridges across the water were black silhouettes.

Cell phones out, pictures and videos taken, shots downed—one or two by me—and drunken, simplistic statements of awe: "I'll be damned" and "What the hell?" and "It kinda looks like hell."

But whether it looked like hell or not, the red lights, billowing slowly in some great wind we couldn't feel, were very beautiful.

"Let's go outside," Alexis said, after I don't know how many minutes of drinking and staring out the window.

So we went out and around the building and ascended a grassy slope right on the edge of the water. There were a few other people here, because suddenly, the whole damned city was out and about and gazing at the sky.

We sat down atop the slope and stayed there for twenty or thirty minutes. The lights were still

bright when we returned to my car.

"Don't drive us." Alexis sat down on the hood of my car. "Your car will be fine."

"I'm okay."

"Don't be an idiot. You're not driving."

I thought about telling her that she was pretty when she was tipsy, but then I'd have to explain that she was also pretty when she was sober.

"So what's your plan?" I said.

"The trolley stops close to my apartment."

"The trolley only runs...." I checked my watch. "We have half an hour."

The closest trolley stop was the one across from Starbucks, near the Dalton Building. Alexis took my hand and we started in that direction. We'd be fine, of course. It was three blocks down and two or three blocks over.... No need to hurry. But we hurried and stumbled like a couple of fools.

It was fun and somewhat surreal, what with our buzzing heads and the constantly-expanding mouth of Hell looming in the sky behind us.

The fun ended when we reached Fourth Street and started west. The Dalton Building was just right there, along with the trolley stop. Alexis was trying to tell me something, a joke she'd found online, something about running and never getting there, but she couldn't stop laughing.

And then came the minor, distant noise, and a man about twenty feet in front of us collapsed.

The scene, as I said, was already surreal. When the noise came and the man hit the sidewalk, reality vanished entirely, at least for a second.

Until Alexis squeezed my hand.

"Everett," she said, "was that a gun? Is that man dead?"

I raised my eyes to the Dalton Building and saw the flash at about the same time the second noise sounded, and Alexis fell. I felt heat in my stomach, thought I was dead, thought no way in hell had it happened to her, but the heat, I realized, was nothing but a very abrupt need to shit my pants.

A second later, it hit me: **Move, you idiot bastard!**

I was still holding her hand.

She was crumpled on the sidewalk and bleeding badly. Her face still had its color, and despite the expanding darkness on her stomach, I thought she was surely still alive. But her eyes weren't seeing anything. They were wide and totally gone. I'd bent over as if waiting for her to get up. And yes, I was still holding her hand.

I let go and ducked into an alleyway between a café and an insurance office. I waited for several minutes, waited for another shot.... Nothing. Waited for Alexis to get up. She didn't. Of course she didn't.

And I accepted, at some point, that she wouldn't.

I moved north, withdrawing my phone from my pocket, and saw that the cellular service was flickering in and out. But surely I could make an emergency call.

No.

I cursed it, moved forward another few feet, and tried again. Still nothing.

Help had to be on the way. A shooter was in the Dalton Building. People were dying. Here, right here, and surely help was on the way.

The drunks are out on the south shore of the river, I thought. **That's where the police are.**

For now.

In a minute, an officer would patrol this area. Surely within ten or twelve.

I muttered another curse under my breath, closed my eyes, knowing very well that ten minutes was far too long.

Best to move, I thought, because my head, like that scene in the northern sky, was billowing in the wind, and I could think better while I was moving.

I stepped out of the alley onto Third Street. There was an older couple coming toward me; they'd no doubt been down in the River Market, and they were talking loudly about the lights. I told them to go back the other way, there was a shooter in the Dalton Building, to call the police if their phones worked, find the police, something, and I moved on before they could respond.

Making my way down Third Street, jogging, walking, stumbling, until I knew I was well beyond the Dalton Building, and then I cut back over to Fourth Street. Still no sirens. No goddamned

sirens. But occasionally, another not-so-distant **pop** would sound, and every time, I saw Alexis crumpling to the sidewalk.

To my left, on the other side of Fourth Street, several blocks down, was the looming silhouette of the building in which I worked. The red in the sky had expanded, and the entire area was hell.

I crossed Fourth Street, moved in behind a brick column in front of a bank, and bent over. My head was clearer, I think, but my stomach was suddenly determined to revolt, from one end or the other. I willed myself to vomit. And sat down.

I again checked my phone.

Not only was the service out completely, but the device itself now refused to work properly.

When I could, I started toward the Dalton Building, hanging close to the building fronts. A couple of blocks from my destination, there came a sudden thud to my right. I stopped, turned, and saw Death staring through a souvenir shop's front window.

No. Not Death. Just a scared old man.

He nudged the door open and ushered me in.

"Your phone doesn't work, does it?" he said.

I said no.

"Been alone in here," he said. "Afraid to leave. No phone, not even the land line. I saw a cop, finally. He got shot. Right there."

He pointed, but I didn't look.

The old man said: "If you want to know something else, look at this."

I followed him through the dark to a break room in the back of the store. He flipped a switch and the lights came on.... But they flickered maddeningly.

"Not that." He pressed a button on a small flat panel TV that sat on a card table in the corner of the room. "This."

The image on the screen looked like the northern sky: a shifting curtain of red.

"Go ahead and try to tell me," he said. "Tell me that ain't some kind of voodoo."

I encouraged him to not give up on the phones, and though I agreed with him that I was crazy, way too inebriated, I stepped back outside and continued toward my workplace.

Because I knew who was shooting. Because I'd seen him. Never mind that I hadn't a clue what I would say or do should I get to him.

I thought about his bastard scowl. And proceeded on.

I noticed movement in the far left corner of my vision, and with one **crack**, it stopped.

I came to the Dalton Building's front door, swiped the key card from my wallet, and entered.

The lobby was faintly red and the shadows were far too vivid. The room seemed, however, void of death and psychopaths.

I pushed through a corner door to the stairwell and (somehow) ascended six floors to my office, where I punched a number into my desk's bottom drawer and withdrew a Ruger .22 pistol. It had been an impulse buy several years ago, while I was still in school. You can only hear of so many violent crimes, I'd told myself, before you find something with which to defend yourself.

I questioned whether or not I was capable of shooting a human being if I had to. There was no John Wayne in me. I was nothing more, or less, than a scared, half-drunk lawyer who'd only shot a gun four times in his entire life.

Possibly, I'd find out very soon.

I then went to Alexis's office. The door was locked, but I stood before it and looked through the glass. I could see her desk and a red-tinted window beyond it. I'd come to this door many times before, usually just to wave, to open it a bit and ask how her day was going.

For a moment I saw her sitting at her desk. She was talking on the phone, looking up at me, holding up a single finger.... **Just one minute. I promise.** And I knew I was looking at something that was a combination of hundreds of various memories.

I thought back to the scene on the sidewalk, where I'd stood with her, and saw myself looking up at this building, recalled the small flash, and I knew where he was. The most sensible place in the building **for him** to be. Where else would he have gone?

Four years ago, a fire had ruined three offices on the tenth floor. The owners of the Dalton

Building had never bothered to repair them, choosing instead to seal them off with a plywood barrier. They'd been empty, anyway, the landlord had said. Why waste the money?

I returned to the stairwell and ascended, using my otherwise useless cell phone as a light. Maybe the lights worked. Maybe they didn't. Either way, I didn't want to do anything that could possibly announce my presence.

I was on the stairs between the ninth and tenth floor when I began to hear the wind, and beyond the wind, another noise that I could not place. This other noise did not last for long.... But it caused me to pause.

You're drunk.

Except I wasn't.

You're hearing things.

Yes, but they were real things.

As quietly as possible, I emerged from the stairwell into the tenth floor corridor. The plywood barrier was lying in the floor. And just beyond it, basked in the constantly-shifting red glow from the north, amidst the charred remains of a burnt office, I saw a dark figure crouched before a broken window. He was holding a gun and looking at me. The wind was swirling in around him. And I could see his scowl.

For a moment, there was only silence between us.

Silence, and the wind.

What did I hear? The wind?

No, it wasn't just the wind.

"I know," Landon said. "I'm thinking."

My left hand clenched the Ruger, but I could not raise it. If I could just raise it, I thought, I could likely stop the whole thing, whether I killed him or not. Just raise the gun and pull the trigger.

I was very drowsy, though, not drunk but drowsy, and my mind was turning over and over and over again.

Landon stood, using the scoped rifle like a cane.

"I knew it would be you," he said. "He told me."

I heard myself speak.

Who?

The young man did not answer. He raised the rifle and its shape disappeared and became a single black point against the red northern lights, and as I was finally raising the Ruger, there was a flash, followed by the faint smell of smoke, and a considerable weight slammed into my torso. I fell slowly, and I remember thinking: **That didn't hurt so badly.**

The pain would come later.

My fall ended. Slumped against the wall in the corridor, gazing with blurry vision across the small, burnt wasteland as Landon crouched back down before the window. I blinked as I bled, and my already light head floated up higher and higher.

"Who now?" he said.

No reply that I could hear.

And then he reached out and adjusted something on a box to his right. An old radio, I thought, if I was seeing things properly.

I swallowed a wad of spit. It hurt so goddamned badly that I thought the pain might kill me before the gunshot wound. I told myself to watch and listen. That was all I had to do.

The red curtain grew brighter.

A low noise, similar to the one I'd heard before, came from the box. It was like a voice, but it wasn't speaking any language I'd ever heard. But then, I was bleeding, and I wondered if I was hearing some extraterrestrial voice from the lights. Except it sounded close to human, the voice, and it was coming from the box. The radio. If the box was a radio.

The noise grew louder and Landon began to cry.

"I got him," Landon said. "Who now?"

I reached for the Ruger. I hated that noise and I hated Landon, and I tried to just look at those lights as I fumbled for the gun, but I couldn't find it, maybe later. If I ever saw later.

I think I told Alexis how sorry I was. Thought about that low and awful voice. Then I let it all go.

They told me I'd be okay, but there's an awful, aching orb in the center of my chest, like a permanent heart attack. They don't know what **okay** is. I've been okay, and this isn't it.

A police officer, a skinny guy with a military hairdo whose name was Andrew, came to my room a day or two after it happened and told me I was incredibly stupid, so stupid it was almost unfathomable, but he also said, all things considered, I was pretty damned heroic, and maybe heroes and stupidity are just two peas in a pod.

"Eight people," he said, "including your friend. Three wounded, and that includes you."

I asked him to help me sit up. He did. And I asked him about the box. I was hoping he'd ask me what the hell I was talking about, so I could write the whole thing off as a delusion. But his expression gave away the truth. There was a box. And it was significant.

"Old eighties radio from Macy's," Andrew said.

"He was talking to it."

Andrew said he wasn't surprised.

Again, I asked him about it.

He tried to tell me it was nothing, the kid was just ill and talking to himself, but I told him to fucking tell me, and he ended up saying that the radio had been gutted of its components and filled with gore. Brain matter, specifically, from Landon's dad. The old man was up in North Dakota, he said. Wrapped up in a tarp behind his house, with a good portion of his skull very crudely sawed away.

"Landon quit school," Andrew said, "back in December. Kid never met a person he liked. That's what they all said."

I made a noise of some kind.

And almost told him about the noise from the radio, about the TV in the gift shop, and if you put it all together, you'd know that the red curtain somehow made the radio work. I almost told him how the dead don't speak our language anymore.

But apparently some can understand them.

I thought of Alexis. Laughing, then crumped on the sidewalk. When I think about the dead, I think about her. And when I think of her, I think about the dead.

Andrew noticed my torture.

"Try to get some sleep, Everett." He patted my shoulder. "We'll talk later."

He pulled the door shut as he left.

And that was the last time I talked to the police.

They understand I'm not okay. I don't have anything to say to them.

What I have is an ache in my chest, and there's nothing to be done about it.

Except hope the lights return.

Because I think constantly about Alexis. And I wonder if she'll be there with them, willing to talk to me.

The End.



Mitch Sebourn

Mitch Sebourn is a writer, law student, and former English teacher. He lives in central Arkansas. Among his influences are Stephen King, Clive Barker, Cormac McCarthy, and Don DeLillo. Whenever possible, he enjoys escaping to seldom-visited mountaintops in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. He is the author of several novels, including *Watershed* and *Sleight of Hand*, and the poetry/short fiction collection *Hawks & Handsaws*. Visit his website at: www.mitchsebourn.com



The Shriek of
the Harpy

Sebastian Bendix





CASE #84977

The Shriek of the Harpy

By Sebastian Bendix

NOV. 8TH

OBJECTIVE ACHIEVED!!!

Guys – it finally happened! I GOT THE JOB!! Yes, your intrepid blogger Muriel Sharpe has FINALLY landed her dream gig as a film archivist. I'M SO EXCITED!!! It took me 4 years of undergrad and 2 post but I am at last ready to make my big screen debut! And by that I mean getting down with some SERIOUS ARCHIVING and film restoration!

But of course, it wouldn't be my life if there wasn't a cloud to the silver lining. As it turns out, I'm not super crazy about my bosses. First of all, their names are Kurt and Kitt? Are you fucking kidding me? KURT and KITT??? Did they like, apply for their positions at the same time wearing matching outfits? At first I thought they HAD to be a couple, but nope, not even dating. They're both annoyingly attractive too, perfect, skinny and blonde. Totally LA... and we know how much I LOVE that. Seriously, if I could live somewhere else, I would be out of here in a heartbeat. I am so OVER this town. But here is where I need to be to do what I love, so Kurt and Kitt are what I have to deal with. At least for the time being.

Oh, and one thing, OF COURSE Kurt is a TOTAL CHAUVINIST. Even after I got the job he kept questioning me about my qualifications and I'm like, hello! EIGHT YEARS OF SCHOOL!! But no, he keeps going on and on about "practical experience" as if I'm some ditzy girl who doesn't know how to handle a film print or something. And I mean, yeah, I haven't done a TON of print handling, but I've spent a lot of time with Gina in the booth of the Crescent and I think that with my EDUCATION the point should be moot. But it's not, because I am a woman. And Kitt, instead of backing up a sister, just stands there nodding to everything Kurt says like some sort of Barbie automaton. WHATEVER. I'll make the best of it, but I got a misogynist vibe there, BIG TIME.

Anyway, heading into the office to talk about my first real assignment! Later for now!

The Downtown Nickelodeon, known to local cinephiles as “The Old Nick”, was tucked in between a Mexican grocer and a used stereo store on 8th street in the heart of downtown Los Angeles. The once garish marquee had been long torn down, but the greasy window of the boarded-up ticket booth was still visible to the keen-eyed observer. Muriel had to use Google maps to find it, a fact that gave her a twinge of shame as she prided herself on knowing the locations of all the old Hollywood movie houses. Even in its heyday the Nick was a lesser frequented theater, mostly a second run venue, so Muriel felt she could afford a little slack. Besides, as exciting as this assignment was, it seemed more janitorial than archive-related, and Muriel was a little offput that this dingy rung on the ladder was where she was expected to start. ***I suppose I should be grateful that I landed the job***, Muriel told herself. But thinking it was one thing; believing was another matter entirely.

Standing at the chained and padlocked front doors, she rooted through her fully stuffed backpack for the keys. Past a bag of Skittles and a travel bottle of Aussie hairspray she found them, twisted and stuck in the tines of one of her roller-style hairbrushes. Muriel sighed as she pulled the keys loose, carrying the weight of the world on her mannish shoulders. Adding injury to insult the sky began to drizzle, dampening her hair into a flat frizzy mop. California rain was a rare and bad omen, thought Muriel glumly. Why did things always have to be so hard?

But Muriel’s soggy spirits were lifted as she took in the wonderful, decaying lobby with its grand staircase and tall proscenium archways. The velvet curtains were tattered and moth eaten and the fixtures – no doubt scavenged for scrap – were long gone, but the theater held proudly to its old world glamour even under an apocalyptic layer of dust. A toppled stanchion still clung to a coiled, rotted rope, and the ruin of a concession booth promised popcorn, soda and candy that had long been consumed. Stepping fully into the lobby Muriel’s footfalls echoed off of the chipped marble floor, invoking the ghost heels of movie-goers past, and she found herself swept up in a wave of nostalgia for a time she had never lived. To a film preservationist this was not an uncommon sensation, but here, in this once vital house of cinema, the feelings were amplified tenfold, redefined with crystalline clarity.

The focal point of the lobby was a large marble fountain that stood at the apex of the room like a holy altar. It was cracked and crumbling and hadn’t held water since the sixties at the latest, but it still had the power to command the viewer’s attention. As a centerpiece for a movie theater lobby it was quite unusual, both garish and beautiful, and Muriel approached it with a mixed appreciation. It was a multi-layered construction; a medium size pool hung suspended by a column above a larger, ground-level pool, the sea-shell sculpt of both suggesting an odd, mid-century fusion of nautical and art nouveau. Draped upon the column, in a spiraling, heavenward pattern, were winged cherubs, or angels upon closer inspection. Even as an agnostically raised girl Muriel had an affinity for angels, viewing them as symbols of feminine power and strength. It gave her some comfort to know they were there, keeping her in sight as she ventured into the darkened recesses of the theater.

It took her a few minutes to find the breaker room, despite the fact that Kurt had explained to her in detail where it was located, to the far left of the dilapidated concession booth. It was dark and cluttered and she needed her phone’s flashlight to find her way, but when she flipped on the breakers the theater was rewarded with welcoming light. Some bulbs popped from the strain of being suddenly revived, but the ones that survived gave off a hazily sufficient illumination. Apparently Kitt was good enough at her job to put in the necessary call to the power company and not leave her new employee fumbling in the dark. “Hooray for small miracles,” Muriel remarked aloud, giving herself the tiniest of chuckles.

Beyond the lobby were the doors leading to the main auditorium, and stepping through them Muriel was once again transported across time. The three story screen was yellowed and torn in several places, but it put to shame most found in modern megaplexes outside of the ones made to IMAX specifications. One could easily imagine taking in a matinee show of ***Lawrence of Arabia*** here during its initial run and getting entirely lost in the projected vistas, overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the all-encompassing anamorphic image. The seats, still arranged in their three section pattern, had long gone to seed and the room hung thick with the smell of mildew, rot and the specter of cigarettes long smoked. But it wouldn’t have stopped Muriel from plopping down and digging into a bucket of popcorn had some time-traveling projectionist started running a

freshly struck print of *Double Indemnity*, or even better, *Touch of Evil*.

Above and to the back was a grand balcony, the kind you didn't see any more in movie theaters, and Muriel could almost make out the silhouettes of couples necking in the shadowy back rows. Ten feet or so above the balcony was the dusty window of the projection booth, looking out over the auditorium like a giant's cataracted pupil. There lay Muriel's destination, but down here, in the safety of the aisles, it didn't look like a very inviting place. The blackness within had the stillness of a crypt and Muriel could not shake the feeling that whatever slept up there was something that was best left undisturbed.

But it was her job to venture into that crypt, so after lingering a bit in the auditorium's splendor she summoned her courage, slipped the key into the lock of the projection booth door and entered to a stale gust of air. The light from the hall barely cut into the gloom, so Muriel fumbled along the wall for a light switch, at last finding one and flicking it on. She needed a moment to take in what lay there before her. The room was dusty and stale and didn't appear to have been used in many a decade, but this was all to be expected. The cutting table had fallen to termites and years of neglect, leaving one of the legs snapped and the table top tipped over at an angle. The splicing equipment sat rusting on the floor with scraps of old leader littered about it like scattered petals. But the projectors, twin hulks of iron, glass and steel, looked shockingly intact. Muriel found herself running a hand along their smooth pleasing forms the way someone might do to a thoroughbred pony or a finely restored vintage car. There was sensuality to their construction that was lost in modern equipment, a craftsmanship that had fallen by the wayside for the sake of efficiency and progress. It saddened Muriel to see them so neglected, and even though it had not been suggested or even implied in her duties, she was tempted to fire the twin workhorses up to see if they still ran.

What **was** implicit in her duties was to inventory the moldy boxes that had been stored in the booth for the better part of the century and see if they held any lost prints. Stacks upon stacks of the boxes lined the walls, sagging under the weight of the years and leaning together like old people needing the other's support. They reeked of mildew and rot and their corners were ragged and rat-chewed, but still they held a certain sad air of dignity.

"Might as well get started," Muriel sighed to herself. But in truth she was thrilled as she wandered into the stacks and picked a box from the top layer, careful that it wouldn't upset the others. She set it down on the floor, and tore open the moldy boxtop, an eager child digging into a Christmas present.

Her nose and throat were immediately greeted by a blast of noxious fumes; the reek of photo chemicals that were far past their expiration date. But the unpleasant odor was a small price to pay for the glory that lay within. Stacked neatly in the box were circular tins – the kind used to house prints in the old days. She felt the same sort of thrill an archaeologist might feel uncovering relics that had been buried for almost a century.

NOV. 11TH

GOLDEN AGE HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR AT THE OLD NICK

One word...AMAZING!!! My first day working at the Old Nick was everything I could have dreamed! I mean, at first I was a little skeezed out being by myself in such a huge abandoned building, but after a few minutes I took to the place like a fish to water! Looks like this old gal (not really, I just turned 35...still young!) was born to be a world-class film archivist. As if there was ever any doubt!

So as it turns out, I guess my bosses aren't TOTALLY CLUELESS, though I seriously don't think they know what they have with the prints I found in the projection booth. In truth, I don't know what we have either, but you bet your butt I aim to find out! It's not going to be easy – the masking tape labels are worn and unreadable so I'm going to have to get my hands dirty and look at the prints with my own equipment, something that I'm not really supposed to be doing. But screw that, I'm not going to let those Ken and Barbie robots get the credit for finding some lost classic! I didn't tell either of them about my blog, but I know I can trust you guys. That said, mum's the word, first rule of fight club, don't let the cat out of the bag, etc...

ANYWAY, more will be revealed when I go back there tomorrow. If it wasn't for the fact that I need to shower and get online to post, I would probably sleep there. I have the feeling that I'll be pulling an all-nighter one of these days, or nights rather! ;)

--

The following morning Muriel arrived at the Old Nick early, pausing only a moment to admire her fountain angels before heading directly into the booth. Any reservations she had from the previous day were gone; now the theater was an old and trusted friend and she was its loyal caretaker. She loved its peeling walls and threadbare carpets and if she had been a woman of wealth she would have bought the place herself and restored it to its former glory. Alas, all of her trust fund had gone into college, and film archiving, while spiritually rewarding, was not likely to make her rich. It was a sad feeling to know that her time here was brief, that the Nick would soon be gone entirely. But Muriel was no stranger to sad feelings, so she pushed them aside and set about getting to work.

With a little creative – re: jury-rigged – re-construction, Muriel was able to get the old splicing table reasonably stabilized and quickly set up her own equipment. Less than a half an hour later and she was holding her first piece of celluloid under the looking glass and parsing through clues as to its title of origin. She identified it as a print of **To Kill A Mockingbird**, and while this was a film Muriel quite enjoyed, it was a well documented title and something most students had seen by their first year of American lit. Putting it aside, she dug into another box, then another, opening tin after tin, her spirits falling with every unremarkable find. **Sunset Boulevard, The Asphalt Jungle, Cat People** – all wonderful films but all easily found on DVD, Blu Ray or TCM on any given night. As the morning wore on Muriel began to suspect that she would not uncover any lost relics in this dreary acquisition, and the feeling that her talents were being wasted re-surfaced like a badly digested meal.

After lunch Muriel resolved to remain optimistic and shifted her focus to a stack of boxes that sat in the corner, looking somehow moldier and more pathetic than the ones she had opened already. Opening the first of the boxes she was hit with a gust so foul that she could only assume something had crawled into the packaging and died, likely a mouse or small rat. She shifted the tins around, checking the corners, and was happy to find the box free of rotting animal corpses. But that horrible smell had to be something, and she wondered if it would be wise to invest in a breathing mask, or to stop the work altogether. Cancer was not high on her list of wants, but the fear of it was not enough to keep her from cracking the first of the tins. Looking down at the magic that was coiled within dissipated her apprehension along with the fumes.

Just by eyeballing the way the print had been stored, Muriel was certain that she was looking at something from the 1930's or earlier, significantly increasing the odds that she had unearthed something that had been lost in the annals of time. As with the other reels the masking tape labels were degraded and illegible, so the only way to identify the print was by putting it on to her table and under the glass, which is exactly what she did. There, magnified in vibrant, full-frame black and white, were images that Muriel had seen only in film history documentaries and reference books. She scrolled the reel towards the leader, heart leaping as she scanned the frames for the title card. When she found it she had to steady herself from fainting.

Looking back up at her in elegant script were the words "Blind Courtesy".

Blind Courtesy was a drama from 1931 that had been directed by British auteur Lyle Abernathy, who would only go on to direct two more Hollywood films before returning to his home country to care for his infirmed and ailing mother. The film's primary claim to fame was that it starred silent era ingénue Delia Whitmore in her first sound role, and critics responded so unkindly to her deep, manly voice that the tortured actress hung herself a mere month after the picture ended its first and only theatrical run. In a sad twist of irony Whitmore was nominated for a posthumous Oscar, but lost to Helen Hayes' and **The Sins of Madelon Claudet**. Even in death poor Delia could find no validation – a feeling to which Muriel, seeking validation herself, could relate.

Despite the apologetic nomination the film was a box office flop, and after a fire on the Warner Brothers lot in 1940 it was assumed that all known prints of the film had been destroyed. But here Muriel was looking at one, crisp and clean as it was on the day of its eighty year-old debut. How it had remained here undiscovered was a mystery, but the answer, likely a matter of simple neglect, was irrelevant. Now there was the only the question of what to do next.

Muriel knew what her type-A bosses Kurt and Kitt would want her to do. They would want her to follow protocol, to re-box the print immediately and deliver it straight to the home office. From there it would be shipped back to the studio, shelved indefinitely unless some bean-counting executive deemed it profitable to shit the film out in a half-assed streaming format. And that

was if things went well. More likely was that **Blind Courtesy** would remain in the dustbins of obscurity and no one, Muriel included, would ever have the pleasure of seeing it. The thought of this heinous injustice, this crime against cinema, was too much for Muriel to rightfully bear. It went against everything she believed in as an archivist, and as a film lover.

Screw Kurt and Kitt, screw their protocols, and screw the studio. Muriel had to experience this lost treasure as it had been intended; on the silver screen. And she was willing to risk it all – her career, her future, everything – for the privilege.

She looked to the twin projectors, standing tall like iron sentinels. There was something about them, some quiet, ancient wisdom that made Muriel question what she was about to do on a deep, preternatural level. But the lure of **Blind Courtesy** was impossible for her to resist, so she focused back on the table and carefully set about assembling the five reel print. An hour later her trembling hands threaded the lead of reel one into the gate, and the film was ready to be viewed for the first time in many decades.

With the flick of a switch the projectors rattled to life, and for a horrified moment Muriel was sure that they were going to seize up and mangle the print. But the gate fluttered gently like the soft beating of a moth's wing and the strip ran through unfettered. The twin bulbs lit with a soft glow and down in the darkened auditorium images once lost in time were recalled from the ether like welcome ghosts. Muriel could hear the scuffling of shoes and the rustle of fingers in popcorn boxes echoing through time, and she wanted so desperately to join them.

To hell with it, Muriel thought. **If I am going to risk my job by running this, why should I stay up here for the entire screening?** Of course, the responsible thing to do would be to remain in the booth and monitor the projectors, but Muriel had passed responsible a ways back and gone barreling straight on to reckless. To come this far only to be denied the experience of watching the film in a darkened theater, well, that would just be stupid. And if there was one thing that Muriel Sharpe couldn't stand, it was thinking of herself as stupid.

So it was decided. She checked the gates one last time and satisfied that all was working properly, went downstairs to take in a private, once-in-a-lifetime screening of **Blind Courtesy**. Her only regret was that she didn't have any popcorn to munch on.

NOV. 12TH

A "COURTESY" TO MY READERS...

Guys...I probably shouldn't be sharing this with you, but...I'm just too excited and I have to tell someone! Today at the Old Nick, well...it seems that sometimes dreams really do come true.

There I was, performing my archivist duties (I still have some qualms there, but whatever) when I stumbled upon a treasure that has been lost to the world for many, MANY years. What was this forgotten gem you ask? Let's just say, for the sake of argument, that it concerned the blind daughter of a wealthy southern family, who despite her obvious handicap has a better grasp on the lives of her family than they do themselves. This of course leads to both laughter and tears, and the heroine, after several heart-breaking setbacks, ultimately finds love with a handsome and rich friend of the family. Roll credits.

Corny? Maybe by today's cynical standards. But some of us can still get swept up in a simple, elegant story told by people who were more concerned with advancing a magical new art form than making a quick buck. Sadly, they don't make them like this sweet, timeless tale any more.

Not that I would have first-hand knowledge of the forgotten film in question. ;)

Sorry to be so cagey, but those of you who love old film as much as I do have by now figured out what I'm talking about. I wish I could tell you that soon you'll have a chance to experience what I experienced today, but alas, I do not currently wield that kind of influence in my chosen profession. But a girl can dream, right?

Anyway, hope I haven't teased too much. I hope to have an equally exciting day tomorrow, so I'm off to bed...if I can get to sleep. I'll see you lovelies on the silver screen! Xoxo

--

The next morning, as she passed the lobby fountain, Muriel experienced a dim echo of the dream she had the night before. It had been a rough-reworking of **Blind Courtesy**, with Muriel naturally cast in the Delia Whitmore role, but instead of suffering from blindness like the film's heroine, Muriel could only see the world in the rich, black and white hues of early cinema. The events that transpired were more drawn from her subconscious than from the movie itself, and

Muriel had trouble recalling any real details, but she did remember something that happened in the dream's finale. She was rushing through a train station to tell a faceless man not to go, that she loved him but just hadn't been able to find the words, when something swept down at her from out of the sky. Whatever it was it had great wings and long black talons, and before she could scream the horrible thing was shrieking and tearing at her face, waking her with a jolt.

This final, unpleasant detail had been buried until the sight of the winged figures on the fountain dredged it back up. Sadness crept in as she slumped up the stairs to the booth; a feeling that her dreaming mind, and her angels, had betrayed her.

She considered starting with the newer boxes, the ones that held prints of well-known and well-preserved titles, but she couldn't resist the temptation to scour the foul smelling box for more lost gems. And to her delight, her temptation was immediately rewarded. The third tin she opened held an infamous, pre-code gangster picture titled **Knuckles Mahoney**, and if Muriel had her film history correct (and she was certain that she did) it had not seen the light of a projector since 1938. All of the reels were pristine and accounted for, making assemblage easy, and before she knew it the print was threaded up and ready to roll.

But there was one thing missing. She simply could not endure another showing without some popcorn, so she rushed out to the corner convenience store to see what they had. Settling for a bag of the pre-popped kind, she bought the snack and hurried back to the theater, eager to get her matinee underway. When she arrived at the doors a homeless woman was parked in front, a junk filled shopping cart blocking the entrance. Muriel stood patiently waiting for the woman to move, to get on with her daily routine. But the woman just stared at the theater, at the boarded-up ticket booth, pulling some memory out of her addled, soggy brain.

Muriel cleared her throat, attempting to facilitate some sort of action, and the old crone turned to her, scowling with a pair of eyes that seemed clouded by smoke.

"I saw a picture there once," the woman said. "When I was a little girl. A horror picture. Dreadful film. Kept me up at night for weeks."

Muriel had deep sympathy for the homeless, especially the elderly, but the clock was ticking and she was anxious to get to her movie. "That's nice," Muriel said condescendingly. "I'm sorry, but I have to get inside."

"Nice?" The woman bristled. "Nothing nice about it! It was a dreadful film, just dreadful. Some kind of monster....with wings." The deep creases in her forehead became somehow more pronounced as she rifled through a long-troubled mind for more details. "A harpy! Yes, that's what it was...a harpy, like in Greek myth." Another pause. "Dreadful film."

There had to be something Muriel could do to move the woman along. The obvious finally dawned on her, and she reached into her pack for a single, crumpled bill. No sooner had she offered it when the dollar was snatched greedily from her hand. The poor old crone was not above charity, it would seem.

"You promise me one thing," she croaked. "If you find that movie in there, you burn it. Burn it to cinder!"

Though she had no intention of ever doing such a thing, Muriel wanted to get the crazy derelict out of her way, so she offered a placating nod. "I will. You have a nice day."

With a scoff the crone pushed her cart on, rusty wheels squeaking her disapproval of the younger woman's patronizing. But Muriel was too preoccupied to give it much thought and five minutes later she was seated, center aisle as usual, happily crunching away as **Knuckles Mahoney** began what was certain to be a thrilling life of cinematic crime.

The film was pretty standard fare for the genre, and the actor who played Knuckles, a long forgotten contract player named Miles Hoover, had nothing on the great screen gangsters portrayed by Jimmy Cagney or Edward G. Robinson. The production was chintzy for a 1930's studio picture, and Muriel found the story offensively misogynistic even by the lax standards of the day. She was mentally composing a scathing review when the effects of the heavily-greased, factory-packaged popcorn took hold, causing her to doze off.

As often happens to those who fall asleep during movies, Muriel's dreams fused with the narrative playing out onscreen, and in a devilish twist of irony her subconscious cast her in the role of Cherry, one of Knuckles' poorly treated molls. Even stranger was that Muriel thrilled at being the gangster's plaything; every cruel word, infidelity, and slap was endured with a rush of dark, forbidden pleasure. When the vicious thug finally saw fit to ravage her, Muriel lost

herself entirely, clawing at his pin-striped suit with garish nails, her moans of pleasure rising to a lurid pitch that would never make it past the MPAA censors. Her cries transitioned to the wail of sirens, and she and Knuckles were now on the run, hiding out in some abandoned old warehouse. The gangster promised that the cops would never take them alive, and when they burst through the doors, tommy-guns blazing, Muriel closed her eyes and prepared to die in a hail of bullets.

Instead there was silence. She opened her eyes, finding the dream warehouse vast and empty, no sign of the cops or Knuckles Mahoney anywhere. She looked to the rafters and saw something perched there, hunched in a cluster of grey, filthy feathers. She thought that it must be some sort of strange barn owl, but when it spread its massive wings, wings too big for even a condor, that notion was dismissed. The creature swooped down, descending on her in a frenzy of flapping, and Muriel screamed as hand-sized talons tore at her face.

She awoke to find that the scream was not emitting from her own throat; it was blaring from the auditorium's archaic and rickety speaker system. The image onscreen was a mad flurry of frames, and Muriel's awakening brain figured that there was something going on with the projector – likely the print's two-strip audio track had gotten stuck in the gate and was causing the whole thing to jam up. In a daze she stumbled from her seat, adding bad popcorn to the already filthy floor, and raced out of the theater as fast as her feet would allow.

The scene in the booth was even worse than anticipated. The final reel was gummed so badly in the projector that it was shredding and peeling back on itself, like a banana being forced through a pinhole. Why the film didn't melt was anyone's guess, but Muriel, not waiting to find out, slammed down the power switch on the side of the lead projector. The machine rattled to a stop, and she did the same to projector two, nearly falling into panic as it violently hitched and seized. But then the monstrous old work horse powered down with a sigh, and Muriel allowed herself to do the same. After a long, slow minute, her breathing caught up with her heart.

She had managed to save the machines, themselves valuable as museum pieces, but the print was another matter entirely. The distressed film strip had popped right off of the reel and was dangling out of the projector on to the unswept floor in a tangled lump. What remained in the projector was giving off an acrid, chemical stench, and it didn't take an expert to see that it was a total disaster. This was a murder scene, a restoration homicide, and Muriel was the prime and only suspect. The right thing to do would be to gather the salvageable materials, come clean with the matter, and accept the consequences with whatever dignity she could find.

But there was another option. If this was indeed a metaphorical murder, could she not consider the possibility of covering it up? No one knew of what she had found here and would be therefore none the wiser if she just made it all go away. Did the world really need a restored print of **Knuckles Mahoney**? In truth, where was the crime in destroying a film that an enlightened film scholar such as herself had deemed dangerously regressive in its attitudes toward women? Wouldn't it be preferable to society on the whole that the cheap, nasty little B-picture remain forgotten, that chauvinists and rapists not to be given more fuel for their sick fantasies, that they be denied a new icon to emulate like the mobster hero of **Scarface** or the serial murderers of **Natural Born Killers**? And if keeping this heroic act a secret meant that Muriel was able to keep her job...would that be such a terrible thing?

Yes, she decided. This was the right thing to do. So without further deliberation she gathered the mangled reel off the floor and stuffed it into her backpack. She considered allowing the undamaged reels to remain behind; it wouldn't be hard to claim that the print was found with a reel missing. But the more she thought about it, the more she wanted the whole film gone. So she emptied her backpack of all other items and fit the rest of the print inside. Then she bolted out the door, a criminal fleeing the scene of the crime.

She was past the fountain and almost out the front doors when she ran into, almost quite literally, Kurt and Kitt.

"Muriel!" Kurt greeted as the fleeing girl skidded to a halt right in front of him. "We just came by to check up on your progress."

"Uh, yeah, well," Muriel stammered. "Not much to report I'm afraid." She shifted the overstuffed pack on her shoulder, attempting to shield it from their prying eyes.

Kurt and Kitt shared a mild look of bewilderment. "Really?" Kurt questioned. "There was a whole stack of film boxes in the projection booth last time we checked."

“Well, I haven’t gone through all of it yet. But so far all I’ve found are titles that are readily available.” She tried to maintain a chirpy tone, despite feeling as though she was being, albeit deservedly, interrogated. “But hope springs eternal!”

With their eerily similar eyes, Kurt and Kitt shared a look of skepticism, then re-directed at Muriel, smiling in unison. “If you don’t mind,” Kurt said. “I think we’ll have a look.”

Muriel’s stomach dropped. Up there in the booth, sitting on her editing table were five reels of **Blind Courtesy**, clearly discovered and tampered with. Once her bosses saw that they would know she was lying, and when they looked in her bag they’d find what remained of **Knuckles Mahoney** and assume she intended to steal it. Then, in addition to losing her job, she would likely be brought up on criminal charges. The jig, as Knuckles might say, was up.

She was about to crack, to confess to it all, when something chimed inside Kitt’s designer purse. The wire-framed blonde scrunched her perfect Aryan nose and pulled out her smart phone, answering the call. “Yes?” she barked into the device. “Christ Phil, are you sure?” A weary sigh followed. “Fine, we’ll be right there.”

“What was it?” Kurt asked with concern.

“There was a mix-up at the Egyptian. The new print of **Playtime** is missing a reel.”

And like that, a bullet was dodged. Kurt and Kitt rushed off to deal with the crisis at the Egyptian, leaving Muriel in the lobby, flushed with adrenaline and relief. Somewhere, someone had been watching out for her, and glancing back at the fountain she couldn’t help but feel that it must have been her angels. She offered them a solemn, sincere appreciation and promised that she would never, ever do anything like this again. A few blocks from her house she ditched the pack in a lonely dumpster, and that was the last anyone would know of **Knuckles Mahoney**.

--

After a restless, guilt-fueled sleep, Muriel returned to the Old Nick the following morning and was relieved to find that Kurt and Kitt had not been back to inspect the prints in the booth. The circular tins that housed the now discarded print sat there, empty accusers, reminding Muriel that she would have to dispose of them as well if she hoped to keep her crime a secret. But without her backpack there was no way to sneak them out, and she couldn’t risk just walking out the door with them, especially in light of her employer’s unannounced visit the day before. An idea struck her, and she went back to the boxes, searching for a print that had been packed without a tin. To her surprise, at the bottom of the rattiest box, she found one.

Collecting it the best she could, she brought the print over to the table to see what sort of movie deserved to be treated this shabbily. Shockingly, the film was remarkably well preserved, a miracle considering it had been left unprotected for so many years. It was the right number of reels to substitute for **Knuckles Mahoney**, so it would seem that Muriel’s promise to the angels had been heard and accepted. All she had to do was pack the mystery print into the tins and no one would ever be the wiser. She would even leave it for Kurt and Kitt to discover, let them have the glory all to themselves. It was the punishment Muriel rightly deserved.

Resolved, she reached for the film, and the end spilled from the table like a snake fleeing the grip of its handler. As she bent over to retrieve the dangling strip, she caught a glimpse of the images repeated in the frames, advancing incrementally like pictures in a flip book. Images that some haunted part of her subconscious demanded were given a closer look.

Don’t do it, Muriel told herself. **Just wrap this thing as tight as you can, cram it in to those tins and don’t forget to tear off the labels. Do not push your luck any further.**

Though it killed her to do so, Muriel was able to stick to her guns and pack the film up without giving it another look. But she decided not to tell her superiors about the find until she had a night to sleep on it, so she busied herself with tidying work and went home later that day with the haunting images still spooling behind her retinas. It wasn’t until she was home, sitting in front of her laptop, that she recalled the strange interaction with the homeless woman outside the theater the day before. A few keystrokes later and she was drawn into the mystery, like a hound chasing a rabbit down a deep and fascinating hole.

NOV. 14th

NOT TO “HARP” ON ABOUT IT, BUT...

As most of you know, I am not the biggest horror fan, but recently I have taken a...let’s call it an **interest** in an obscure film from the 30’s that reportedly scared the bejesus out of folks back

in the day. The movie in question is ***Shriek of the Harpy*** and it was released by a fly-by-night production house named Anvil Pictures in a shameless attempt to capitalize on the Universal Monsters craze. The German auteur director, Rudolph Meiner, was so embittered by the course of his Hollywood career that he returned home to the Fatherland and joined up with the Nazi party after Hitler invaded Poland. Though Meiner was never heard of again after the war, some accounts place him at a concentration camp that was stormed by the allies, and it is presumed that he was shot and killed in the battle. Good riddance, I say!

As for ***Shriek of the Harpy***, the general consensus seems to be that it was a reasonably effective chiller with a standard script and some notable directorial flourishes from Meiner, who was a protégé, at least in spirit, to F.W. Murnau. The titular Harpy was inspired by the monsters of Greek myth, and the creature design by legendary make-up artist Charlie Spears was said to have been quite shocking by the standards of the time. But the thing that was remembered most by the small number of people who saw ***Shriek of the Harpy*** was the blood-curdling sound the Harpy made when it attacked its victims, the “shriek”, as it were. It was a sound so awful that it gave viewers nightmares for weeks afterwards, a claim that at least one viewer I have personally spoken to can support. Sound designers were not credited in films of that era, so we may never know who was responsible for the remarkable noise. But whoever they were, by all accounts they did their job maybe a little too well.

While all of this is fascinating, the thing about ***Shriek of the Harpy*** that interests me is the well-documented rumors that it was horribly, horribly misogynistic. I mean, hello, the movie is about a monster woman who is literally a harpy! Not too subtle there, Gustav! And Meiner is certainly the one to blame – while the screenplay was credited to writer Eugene Torrance, the story is a creation of Meiner’s fevered brain and Torrance later even apologized for scripting it, calling the finished film “Sick, chauvinistic dreck.” (Sad footnote: Torrance hung himself at the age of 40 in the barn of his country home. His body was found swinging from the rafters, watched over by a pair of hooting barn owls.) Needless to say, my interest is piqued.

Lordy, have I rambled tonight! Well, off to bed sweeties. If anyone has any more info pertaining to this lost “treasure” please let me know. I have a teeny weeny hunch that we have not heard the last of the Harpy’s terrifying shriek.

--

Powerless against her curiosity, Muriel raced to the theater the following morning, yanked the changeling print out of the ***Knuckles Mahoney*** tins and slapped it down on her editing table to have another look. Sure enough, staring back at her in a lurid, dripping font was the title “Shriek of the Harpy”. In this, her third major discovery, Muriel had stumbled upon a Holy Grail film for horror fans. Except that no one would ever know she was the one to discover it. Of course she could take credit and boast about it online, but her claims on the internet would not be taken seriously by the fans who posted in the forums. And in terms of seeing it – well, she would have to wait with all the other chumps, if they day ever came when some distributor released it.

Across the room, the projectors called to her. Muriel fell into a fevered trance, and an hour later she was standing before the twin iron hulks, now fully loaded and ready to roll on the film. A force had possessed her, a facet of her barely cognizant mind that ***demand***ed she bear witness to this cinematic atrocity. What was needed, she rationalized, was to face the film’s transgressions head-on, to be incensed and offended by its backwards misogyny so that she might arrive at a keen and thoughtful dissertation, casting a healing light into a dark corner of cinema history. Yes, it was crucial – ***important*** that Muriel Sharpe view this terrible film, and nothing but a private, immediate screening would suffice.

She stood there, finger trembling over the lead projector’s power switch. Here was the moment of truth. She could back out now, leave ***Shriek of the Harpy*** to Kurt and Kitt and be done with all of this madness. She could do as she was told, follow orders and be the good girl. The nice, subservient girl who allowed her male superior to swoop in and claim all of the credit that she so richly deserved.

She threw the switch, ran down into the theater and was in her preferred seat right as the melting candle wax title appeared on screen.

The plot unfolded in a manner quite typical of a 1930’s horror picture. It concerned a young couple, Adelaide and Calvin, who travel from an unspecified city to visit a friend that has taken up residence in a country manor inherited from his wealthy, recently deceased parents. Once

there, the cheerful couple find that their friend, Rupert, is mercilessly henpecked by his shrew (one might even describe her as a harpy) of a wife, Nellie Rae. The constant nagging of his gold-digging spouse drives Rupert into the only place on the estate where he can find solace – the aviary; a magnificent bird sanctuary built by his dead father.

When the brilliantly realized aviary set appeared onscreen, Muriel's heart palpitated. It wasn't the room itself that caused the reaction; though cleverly designed as a dome-like cage, there was nothing unsettling about it save for the fluttering and chirping of the live, on-set birds. The feature that spooked Muriel was the room's centerpiece – an ornate fountain adorned with grim, winged statuary. It was an uncanny cousin to the fountain that sat crumbling in the lobby; so much so that Muriel reasoned that they both must have been carved by the same sculptor. A slow panic gripped her as she tried to reconcile the coincidence, reasoning that the designers of the Old Nick had somehow taken this film as the inspiration for the lobby's focal point. But in her heart Muriel knew that the idea was patently absurd.

In the aviary, Rupert discovers a parchment hidden by his father that appears to detail some sort of occult spell. Adelaide intrudes, attempting to coax Rupert out of his shell, but the gesture backfires when the married man professes his undying love for her. Flustered by the advance Adelaide flees, not realizing that Nellie Rae has been eavesdropping the whole time. Using her husband's failed indiscretion as leverage, Nellie threatens Rupert with a costly and humiliating divorce, and their heated arguing drives the birds into a state of agitated cheeping. The sound causes Rupert to explode, to toss off the shackles of civility by grabbing Nellie and shaking her violently. She responds by clawing him across the face, and in murderous retaliation he pushes her into the fountain's pool and forces her head under the water. The birds take to the air, swarming in a furious cloud of feathers as Nellie struggles in Rupert's death-grip, drowning to the flapping of their wings.

Though the scene was staged to downplay the violence of the murder, Muriel still found it wholly distasteful. The character of Nellie Rae was written to be so loathsome that the viewer sympathized with Rupert's decision to kill her, and her shrill portrayal by an unappealing and rightly forgotten contract player didn't help matters. But the real blame lay in Meiner's cruel direction – his distaste for women was palpable beyond the words that sprung from the actors' mouths. What strong-handed matron had beaten this attitude into him? Muriel wondered. What emasculating trauma had informed his viewpoint, warped his personality into something so vile that it demanded to be poured into every scene, every shot, every hateful frame? Since the dawn of cinema female leads had suffered under the attack of monsters, but there was a sadistic quality ingrained in ***Shriek of the Harpy*** that went beyond simply placing damsels in distress. You could sense Meiner behind the camera, leering as his violent fantasies were trapped in celluloid, and easily imagine the pleasure he would take in the back of a darkened theater, watching women squirm in their seats while the men sat smirking next to them.

Shockingly, Meiner allowed the character of Rupert to feel remorse, but it soon became apparent where all of this was leading. Using his father's witchcraft, Rupert attempts to raise his wife from her watery tomb, his efforts nothing but an act of madness witnessed by the birds. In a moment of restored sanity Rupert tears up the parchment and throws it into the pool, and that's when things take a turn for the supernatural. The birds settle back on their perches, like churchgoers seating themselves at a mass, and as they watch silently something rises from the pool of the fountain. But it is not Nellie – at least not anymore. Great wings crest, shaking off water, and gnarled claws grasp at the fountain's lip, lifting up a terrifying figure. Emerging in Nellie's stead is the Harpy, a distinctly female monster spoken of fearfully in myth, said to occupy a strata of Hell reserved for suicides and those who profit from murder. A head flared with feathers lowers its piercing gaze at the stunned and terrified Rupert, and out of its beak bursts a terrible, soul-wrenching shriek.

As had been reported, the sound was unforgettable and deafening. It shook the theater from floor to rafters and for a moment Muriel feared that the sagging old ceiling was about to cave in from the stress. Thankfully the scene cut away, taking the awful sound and the briefly glimpsed Harpy with it. But those eyes – silvery, piercing and locked in a tight shot – stayed with Muriel long after the frame faded into the next scene. She told herself that they were a trick of make-up, primitive contact lenses, but she could not shake them out of her mind. The scared little girl that still lived in her heart believed that those eyes – and the monster they belonged to – were

real.

The next few reels passed like a nightmare as the Harpy unleashed its terror upon the household. Rupert avoids death by fleeing into the night, but a pretty young housemaid who comes to clean the aviary is not so fortunate. The death toll increases with every following scene as one hapless servant after another meets their grisly fate at the talons of the Harpy. Keeping with the censoring parameters of the time the deaths were not graphically depicted, but Muriel found them to be far more visceral and suggestive than similar scenes in either the Universal or Val Lewton horror canon. The lurid method in which Meiner utilized his camera – a subtle hint of motion here or a lingering of a shot there – suggested that the deaths were violent, protracted and painful. It was a total affront to Muriel's sense of good taste, yet as the picture barreled towards its inevitable climax, she found it impossible to pry her eyes from the screen.

The prerequisite, horror movie thunder storm descends on the manor, and when Calvin and Adelaide discover the maid and butler dead they attempt to leave only to find that their car is stuck in the mud dredged up by the rainwater. Back inside they are greeted by the disheveled and raving Rupert – also driven back indoors by the storm – and naturally the young couple assumes that he must be the killer. But Rupert insists that the deaths are the work of the Harpy, a creature he has summoned from Hell, and when Calvin attempts to call the authorities to take the ranting lunatic into custody, he finds the phone lines have been taken down by the storm. A shadow falls upon the living room skylight, and Rupert cowers by the fireplace, screaming that the Harpy has come for him at last. Calvin and Adelaide are convinced that his mind is completely broken, but when the Harpy shatters through the skylight, Rupert's ravings are proven all too true.

Shown at last in its full glory, the creature design for the Harpy, though exceptional for the time, was no more convincing than the iconic but loveably hokey make-ups for the classic versions of Frankenstein, the Wolf Man or the Mummy. The actress who played Nellie Rae had been transformed into a monstrous angel of death with great black wings and a crown of feathers that crested from her head into twin horns. The woman's fine narrow nose had been re-sculpted into a beak, and those piercing, silvery eyes were framed by thick rings of dark mascara. She wore a Greek tunic-style dress that barely covered her ample breasts, and when she raised her hands they were re-figured into four-fingered, birdlike talons. By today's standards the monster design was quaint and would likely illicit laughter from a jaded, special effects-savvy crowd. But Muriel's suspension of disbelief was strong and well-fortified, and to her the Harpy was as terrifying now as the moment it landed on set.

The Harpy lunged for the camera and Muriel jolted back, as if it was going to fly off the screen and attack her. Calvin stepped in to defend Adelaide, attempting to ward the monster off with a fire poker, but the Harpy swatted the weapon away like an insult. The creature attacked poor Calvin with both talons, raking long swaths of blood down his blandly handsome face. This sort of grisly violence was unheard of in films of this era, and even though the black and white muted what full color would have made plain, the effect was shocking just the same. Adelaide screamed and Muriel looked away, not able to face whatever horror came next. The Harpy shrieked, rumbling the theater, and Muriel was shaken to the core, certain that the sound was coming from somewhere other than the auditorium speakers. There was a great crashing noise from something outside, and suddenly everything went black.

Muriel sat there in stunned silence, thinking for a terrible moment that the world had come to an end. Then there was another teeth-chattering rumble, and she recognized it as the sound of thunder – and not the canned sound effect you heard time and time again in old movies. There was a storm outside, just like in the movie, but this storm was real and was likely the cause of the power outage. Muriel felt a rush of relief, but that gratitude faded quickly to annoyance at the inconvenience of her show being disrupted.

"Godammit," she cursed. The room was ink black, the row of seats barely visible in front of her, and rummaging through her pockets she realized that her phone with its helpful onboard flashlight was sitting on the editing table upstairs. Turning to the back of the theater, she stood and began to fumble her way around, hoping she find her way back to the booth without injury. After that she could try for the breaker room, but she highly doubted that this blackout was a simple blown fuse. The power was likely out for the entire city block, and she would be lucky if she could repack the print and get out of here using only the light of her phone.

She was almost under the balcony when the thunder crashed again, freezing her dead in her tracks. When the scare passed she laughed out loud, feeling foolish for allowing herself to get so spooked. “Silly girl,” she scolded herself playfully.

A shattering, shrill sound atomized the air around her, and Muriel’s soul practically jumped out of her skin. It was the shriek of the Harpy, but this time it was not diffused through the safety glass of cinema fantasy – this time it was real and in the room with her. Muriel looked about, wide-eyed, searching for falling plaster, broken glass, twisted metal, something, anything that would rationally explain the noise. But all she could see was the darkness closing in on her, and all she could sense was the certainty that she wasn’t alone.

The shriek came again, louder and closer this time. Glancing upwards she could see it now, a great shadowy shape perched on the lip of the balcony, silver eyes gleaming in the dark. The Harpy had come for her, demanding that she answer for her crimes, and despite knowing the fullness of terror Muriel couldn’t help but be awed by the spread of its magnificent wings.

The monster swooped from the balcony and Muriel dived into the nearest row, landing hard on the cement with her knees. She yelped as air rushed past her head, blowing her hair back in the gust of a rustling wing. The shriek blasted again furiously, and a steady flapping indicated that the Harpy was circling for another dive. Stooped in a painful crouch Muriel scuttled down the row, careful to keep her head lower than the seats. She was almost out into the aisle when talons tore at her back.

Muriel screamed and thrashed her arms around as if attacked by an angry swarm of bees, but after a few seconds it became apparent that she was swatting at empty air. Breathing heavy, she scanned quickly around, and touching her shoulder she found no wounds, just the unmarred fabric of her T-shirt. The Harpy, if still in the auditorium, had gone silently to ground, leaving Muriel standing alone with just the seats and the white vastness of the movie screen. If the Harpy had ever been there at all, that is.

Tears began to well up in her eyes, but instead of crying she broke into hysterical laughter. Madness. This was all madness. There was no flying monster loose in the theater. The stress of the job, the guilt over trashing a print, the crushing loneliness and self-doubt with which she was in constant denial – one or a combination of these things had pushed Muriel Sharpe over the edge. The right thing to do would be to call her parents and tell them that she had cracked up, suffered some sort of nervous breakdown. Lord knows it wouldn’t come as a surprise. Yes, that’s what she would do – she would walk calmly out of this theater, go get some help and leave the world of film preservation, and this godforsaken place, behind.

Feeling the fool, Muriel limped out of the auditorium, stumbling into the lobby to the startling crash of more thunder and the disorienting strobe of lightning flashes. The rain was coming down so hard that the domed ceiling had sprung fist-sized leaks, showering water into the fountain’s pool, filling it to a frothing brim. From their perches Muriel’s beloved cherubs glared down, their once kindly faces full of scorn, their cheeks streaming with bitter, rainwater tears. There was no comfort to be taken from them anymore; now they were harbingers of doom.

As she neared the fountain, Muriel slipped on a wet tile and was driven down to her already agonized knees. She cursed and spat and blamed the cherubs, reaching for the lip of the large pool to haul herself up. But before her fingers could find purchase, a hand that was not hers slapped down on the lip. A clawed, four-fingered talon.

“Oh god,” Muriel stammered as the Harpy rose from the fountain’s pool, exactly as it had in the movie. Lightning flashed again, illuminating the creature, and Muriel could see that unlike its cinematic counterpart, this Harpy was realistic and entirely convincing. Greasy black feathers sprouted from grey mottled flesh, and its beak, no mere make-up job, was tapered into a razor-keen point. It extended its wings to their full glory, shaking off water in an icy spray, splattering Muriel’s terrified face. The eyes – those terrible eyes – narrowed as it opened its beak, and when it shrieked a slimy tongue probed forth like a worm seeking decay.

Muriel didn’t even realize that she had gotten to her feet until she stumbled back and crashed through the auditorium doors. Her mind was waging a war between shock and hysteria with sanity caught in the crossfire, still hoping that this was all some vividly realized nightmare. Thankfully adrenaline flooded in to the rescue, clearing the fog of terror, allowing her to snap into crisis mode. She scanned the area for something, **anything** that could be used as a defense, and her eyes fell upon a velvet stanchion rope that had rolled under the seats five decades past.

Picking it up, she ran for the doors, reaching them just as the flapping, screeching horror was closing the distance. She pulled the doors shut and wrapped the thick moldy rope through the brass handles, tying it off into a makeshift barricade. The Harpy slammed into the other side, shrieking in vengeful protest.

The obstruction was not going to hold the monster at bay for long, so Muriel quickly set about finding an escape route. She ran to the front of the theater, to the exits on either side of the screen, but both had been bricked up to keep out vandals and squatters. The only clear way out was back through the auditorium doors and past the Harpy, an option Muriel was not about to consider.

There was the possibility of trying to escape through the balcony, but she couldn't remember if the upstairs exits were boarded up or not. The question was moot as there was no way to access the balcony from the auditorium, unless she could convince the Harpy to give her a lift. Whatever amusement Muriel took from that thought was obliterated by the splintering of the barricaded doors, and she furiously looked for someplace to hide. The only place that could even warrant consideration was the crawlspace that separated the movie screen from the theater wall, a space that measured no more than a foot across. Cursing her inability to commit to a diet, Muriel squeezed into the crawlspace and hoped for the best.

She fit, but just barely. The last of her body was pulled into the space when she heard the auditorium doors smash open with a mad flurry of wings.

The Harpy made guttural chirping noises as it swooped around the auditorium, seeking out its prey. It was only a matter of time before it sussed out where Muriel had hidden, so if she intended to mount some form of defense, she had better do it fast. As if in answer to her prayers, her eyes caught the dull gleam of metal lying on the crawlspace floor, not more than three feet away. Looking closer she recognized it as the head of a hammer, and as the hideous, unnatural being flapped and chattered just beyond the barrier of the screen, Muriel squeezed further into the crawlspace in an effort to reach the weapon-ready tool.

With incredible effort she strained, reaching down and hooking a finger under the cloven head. She lifted her hand, balancing the hammer from her fingertips until it was close enough for her other hand grab it by the handle. But her awkward positioning caused her hand to jostle, and the hammer fell loose and clattered back to the floor.

The sound of feet landing was heard outside the screen, and a winged silhouette stood there, listening. Muriel held every muscle in her body still, hoping that the creature would be thrown off by her silence and lack of movement. In her terror, Muriel tried to reason what sort of mind – animal, human or otherwise – the Harpy possessed. Did it think? Could it be bargained with? It did possess feminine attributes – was there a possibility, however small, that she could appeal to it on that level, one woman to another?

"Hello?" Muriel asked the silhouette. "Can we talk?"

Silence. Not so much as a chirp. "Look...you don't have to do this. Just let me go and you'll never see me again. We can keep this between us girls. I won't even tell anyone I ever saw you. Girl Scout's honor."

The silhouette cocked its flared head and for a moment Muriel actually believed that the creature had heard her. ***I did it!*** she convinced herself. ***I got through to it. To her.***

But then the Harpy gave its answer, an inhuman shriek, letting it be known once and for all that there was no soft, feminine side here to be reached. It lunged forth with murderous intent, talons raking at the screen, tearing away hunks in long, jagged rivers. In a final desperate move Muriel reached again for the hammer, managing to grasp the handle in her cramped and sweaty palm. There was a loud ripping sound as the Harpy tore into the crawlspace, and Muriel swung upwards with all her strength, striking the monster hard on the beak.

The Harpy stumbled back, talons clawing at air. ***How you like me now, bitch?*** was Muriel's not-spoken aloud retort. The creature shook off the pain with a rustle of feathers, and Muriel swung again, this time hitting it on the scowling crest of its head. The fiend screamed and spat and took to the air, and Muriel ran for the auditorium exit, which had been left wide open in the Harpy's destructive wake.

Muriel charged into the lobby, and forgetting about the slick tile went sliding across the floor, smashing her body into the basin of the fountain's pool. The Old Nick's ceiling was now a giant colander, showering down rainwater and soaking Muriel to her already shivering bones. As

she pulled herself up to make a final dash for the doors, the Harpy flew in from the auditorium, screeching in hateful triumph. It landed in a crouch right in front of the doors, and when it rose to its full height the spread of its wings blotted out all routes, and all hope, of escape.

To the right were the marble stairs that led to the projection booth, and without fully understanding what she was doing, Muriel ran for them. She took the slippery stairs two steps at a time, expecting the Harpy to descend on her at any moment and tear her to shreds. But the monster never came at her, and she reached the booth winded and shaking but otherwise intact. She slammed the door shut then grabbed an old chair to wedge under the door knob, knowing full well that it wouldn't hold the creature back for long. But it gave her a moment to catch her breath and allowed her frantic mind to formulate some sort of plan.

The room was dark, but after some fumbling she was able to locate her bag and in a nice bit of luck came upon a penlight, which meant she wouldn't have to use up what little was left of her phone's battery. She dug her phone out of the bottom, and was about to call 9-11 when she realized how insane her story was going to sound. Instead she called Kurt, and getting his voice mail, left a message that there was an emergency and he needed to come to the theater right away. As soon as she hung up, the battery died.

She turned her light to the projectors where ***Shriek of the Harpy*** sat threaded, waiting to play out its grand finale. It dawned on Muriel that perhaps, as crazy as it all sounded, the manner in which the Harpy was destroyed in the film would be the key to destroying it here in the real world. Old horror movies always had happy endings, and unlike the slasher films of the 80's, when the monsters died in the classics they stayed dead, at least until the cheaply made sequel. And ***Shriek of the Harpy*** had earned no sequel.

Muriel ran to the projector, tore out the final reel and dragged the last few feet of film over to her editing table, not even bothering to detach the print from the machine. Grabbing the looking glass, she held the penlight in her teeth and furiously scrolled through the final reel, doing her damndest to suss out the plot.

The climax predictably took place in the aviary with the three principles and the Harpy present. There were shots that seemed to indicate Adelaide attempting to reason with the monster (as Muriel had done) but ultimately it turns on the true guilty party, Rupert. Muriel hurried through the frames of Rupert being mauled by the vengeful creature, but the killing seemed to go on and on for several feet of film. Finally the scene cut to Calvin recovering the parchment, and in a desperate move he throws it into the fountain, which calls up some sort dimensional vortex from the depths. The Harpy follows the parchment into the vortex and as lightning strikes the manor and sets it aflame, the young heroes escape. The last shot was of the couple standing arm in arm, watching the manor burn to the ground as the final title card announced that in no uncertain terms this was "THE END".

So that was it. She had to destroy the parchment – throw it into the fountain, creating a dimensional vortex that would summon the Harpy back to Hell. Only there was no parchment. There was no magical document of any kind. All Muriel had was the fountain in the lobby...

...and the film itself. Perhaps the print of ***Shriek of the Harpy*** was the parchment, the magical Macguffin around which this entire nightmare revolved. Yes, that had to be it! It was the only thing in this insane situation that made any kind of sense.

Something crashed through the projection window and a tornado of dust and feathers exploded into the room. Muriel instinctively grabbed her scissors from the table as the Harpy picked itself up off the floor, once again rising to its full terrifying height. Its wings were folded around its body like a protective cloak, but when Muriel flinched at it, wielding the scissors like a dagger, the wings spread to their furthest breadth. Then it shrieked at her with such force that her eardrums erupted into spasms.

Acting on blind instinct, Muriel lunged with the scissors, stabbing them right above the monster's ample, womanly breasts. The creature's silvery eyes widened into glistening pools of shock and it withdrew, clawing at the handle of the scissors, attempting to pull them out. Muriel wasn't going to wait to see if it succeeded. She scooped up what she could of the print and fled the room, trailing film in her panicked wake.

Out in the lobby, the storm had built to a crescendo, the crashing sound of thunder nearly drowned by a thousand tiny waterfalls pouring through the ceiling. Muriel stumbled down the stairs until a dangling loop of film tripped her up and sent her sprawling the rest of the way. But

there wasn't any time for pain. She struggled to her feet, wrapped the tangle of film around her in a death shroud, and launched herself towards the fountain.

But ***Shriek of the Harpy*** did not want to let her go. It tightened around her like a constricting snake; sharp, sprocket-holed edges slicing into her, a death by a million paper cuts. It tripped her up again at the fountain, causing her to smash into it with her shins, sending white flashes through her body like electric jolts. Screaming in both pain and frustration, she ripped and tore at the print until her hands were bloody, but the celluloid was seemingly forged of steel.

Finally, she gathered a handful and shoved it into the pool like a homicidal mother drowning an unwanted child. Then she waited for the portal to appear.

At first nothing happened – no change in the surface of the water – and Muriel nearly burst into tears. But then there were ripples, and then a churning, and soon a small whirlpool had formed, opening a fissure into some terrible world beyond. Despite the nightmarish implications of such a world, Muriel was so happy to see it, so happy that it was real, that she broke into hysterical gales of laughter.

A shriek of torment carried over Muriel's cackling and she froze, staring blankly into the rushing vortex of the pool. The air came alive behind her, charged with the flapping of great wings, and Muriel knew that the Harpy was diving in to attack. She could not bear to face that horrible thing again, could not stomach the thought of those terrible eyes being the last thing she saw, so she tensed and waited for the talons to rip her apart like human taffy. But there came no pain, only a splash and a spray of water, and Muriel opened her eyes to see the Harpy torpedoing into the vortex after the rapidly sinking print. Then, both the monster and the film from which it was spawned were gone.

"Muriel?" a voice asked behind her. Muriel whipped around to find Kurt standing there, flustered and confused. "What in heaven's name is going on around here?"

That was a really good question. Muriel would have loved to explain it, to tell him the story of how she had saved herself and defeated a monster by drowning a rare film print in a fountain pool, but all evidence of the nightmare – the vortex, the Harpy...even the storm – were gone as if they had never happened. No one would ever believe her, and at this point, Muriel wasn't sure that she could believe it herself. All she could do was throw her head back and laugh.

And she kept on laughing for a very long time.

NOV. 26th

I'M BACK!

SO...gentle reader, your favorite (former, maybe one day again...whatever) film archivist has returned with another update. Right now I'm blogging from my parents as I have been released into their custody for the Thanksgiving holiday. "Custody?" you ask? Yes, well, that's a story, isn't it? Suffice it to say, Muriel Sharpe has suffered a mild breakdown, at least that's the official version. I've spent the last few weeks in the beautiful and palatial Angel Memorial clinic where I've been treated for what the doctors are calling a "brief psychotic episode". Sounds crazy (pun intended), right? Yeah, well, what can I say? Girl's got an active imagination...I guess. Jury's still out on that one as far as I'm concerned. Regardless, I'm on some serious medication, and not the fun kind. My doctors (all male of course...hello "female hysteria" diagnosis!) say I may need to be on it for the rest of my life. As if "my life" couldn't get any better!

(That last part was sarcasm BTW)

Since the cat (or bird more accurately) is now out of the bag, let's just say that my unauthorized movie screenings did not have a healthy effect on my pretty little brain. Somehow I got the idea that the monster from ***Shriek of the Harpy*** was attacking me and I ended up stabbing one of my bosses (Kitt, the fembot) in the shoulder with some scissors when she surprised me in the projection booth. (She's alive, thank goddess, and not pressing charges as long as I stay in therapy). Then my other boss found me in the lobby, trying to drown the horror movie print in the creepy old fountain that some lunatic decided to build there. Yeah, quite a scene, I know. Needless to say I lost my job, got sent to the booby hatch and here we are, back at mom and dad's. What an awesome start to my career! Yay me!

(Again, sarcasm people, look it up)

So that pretty much brings us up to speed. But before I go...and not sure when I'll be back...it depends how I respond to "treatment"...I do want to issue a mild warning: That stupid,

misogynistic (and Holy Hell is it misogynistic...but more on that someday) movie was rescued from my drowning attempt and has been fully restored. There is already a major home video release planned, and no, I won't be credited for finding it, thanks for asking. Now I won't claim that ***Shriek of the Harpy*** will have the same effect on you as it did on your intrepid blogger, but I do urge you NOT to give this EVIL film your time, attention, or money. For horror fans I know that the temptation might prove too great, especially with the film's sordid reputation, but I'm begging you, PLEASE just let this hateful piece of celluloid fade back into obscurity where it belongs. If you hear the Harpy's shriek calling you, I'm begging, BEGGING you to ignore it.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaand someone in a film forum I frequent just posted that the studio who owns the rights has already announced a remake. PERFECT.

The End.



Sebastian Bendix

Sebastian Bendix is a Los Angeles based writer and musician, as well as host of a popular midnight horror film series, Friday Night Frights at the Cinefamily. He attended school at Emerson College for writing and has had pieces published in both in print (Mean magazine) and online (CHUD.com). He has written several screenplays in the fantasy/horror genre, one of which, The Black Cradle, is in development as an independent feature. The Patchwork Girl was his first foray into the world of prose fiction. His second novel, The Stronghold, is nearing completion and will be out to publishers in 2015.

Link to my website: <http://sebastianbendix.com>



The Withering
Woman

Terry Miller

Physician: Dr. Lotherton
8715-AED19





CASE #29039

The Withering Woman

By Terry Miller

I awoke to the sound of birds chirping in the hollow
Peer outside my window to gaze upon a swallow.
The sky clearing to reveal a gentle shade of blue
Brightening with the rising sun, such a comforting hue.
I rise to start my day, the t.v. blaring down the hall.
I walk into the room and shuttered at what I saw.
There in the corner with a gash on its head.
A body lay motionless, no doubt she was dead.
Empty bottles on the floor, no one died of thirst,
Not another person around, a suspect I was first.
So I buried the body out back in the woods,
Packed the last mound of dirt down best that I could.
I returned to my home to proceed with my shower
And arrived late at work, nine o'clock was the hour.
All day I was quiet, not too productive was I.
Conscience steadily creeping, hungover, my mouth was dry.
I punched the clock and returned to my quaint, quiet house;
Discovered her shirt, buttons torn from the blouse.
Such a sweet smell of honeysuckles I took in with a breath.
I searched all around for anything else I had left.
Now all evidence was gone the best that I knew.
I sat down with a beer and cigarette smoke I blew.
My mind raced for memories, but I could not recall
No bits, no pieces, no recollections at all.
Who was this woman? How I wish I could tell
How she'd come to my door, or how she'd died, as well!
What happened in-between to the point of injury.
I entertained the fantasy, such a morbid curiosity!

Another beer from the fridge, ashes falling to the tray,
I twist off the top to let it rest where it lay.
The silence of the house made loud tickings of the clock.
I had a few drinks down when came the faint knock.
Rain was pouring outside, she stood naked and shivering.
Mud covered her feet, her blue lips were quivering.
Without thought I took her in, as pretty as she was.
Her skin was wet and pale, a bit shriveled as water does.
Honeysuckles still seemed fresh on her neck, the sweet scent.
Her body was cold but soft to the touch, then we spent
Hours beneath the covers, her body never seemed to warm.
Yet, I paid little mind as we made love into the morn.
Sleep fell upon me but I awoke again to the chirping.
The t.v. was blaring and my head was hurting.
I walked into the room and just as before
There her body lay still and naked on the floor!
The cut on her head bled as if it was yet fresh.
Blood trickling down to a stream on her breast.
Was I mad? I pondered but quickly resumed
To carry her to the place her own self she exhumed.
That day was so long as many others I did wait
To repeat the horror of lust we both did satiate.
Then I lost interest the more she reduced to bones,
Ignored the knocking met with haunting moans.
I awoke one night, her bones rattling my door
Slowly coming louder, I could no longer ignore.
She stood there smiling or, at least, it seemed
For all the flesh was gone, just a skeleton I'd seen.
An arm reached out to clutch my chest,
Digging deeper where my heart did rest.
It was then she tore it from its cage, still beating.
I fell to my knees in the pool I was bleeding.
Death lured me to my cold, quiet grave
In a place beside her own, for me, she had saved.
Now my own flesh was rotting, my vanity withered.
The bugs came crawling, and the worms, they did slither.
A frigid, boney hand soon crept into my own.
We rested there silent until bone was on bone.



Terry Miller

Details not released at present



Channel Hostility

James Michael Shoberg

Physician: Dr. Lichten
6428-SED41





CASE #29039

Channel Hostility

James Michael Shoberg

Nick was a temperamental brat who always got his way,
And if you dared to tell him "No," there'd be a price to pay.
The bossy, brassy, selfish snot behaved as if deprived.
Not one of his relations smiled when Nicholas arrived.
One day, his poor grandparents had the most atrocious luck.
By absolute necessity, with Nick they had been stuck.
"Oh, it's no trouble"—Grandma sighed—"It's just one afternoon,"
While, truthfully, she felt, "The little beast can't leave too soon!"
That's when the ill-bred monster made his presence known as well,
As if the very thought of Nick had summoned him from Hell.
"I hate this house! It's boring," he protested in a fit.
"If you were mine," stewed Grandma, "you'd be far too sore to sit."
Nick's mother kissed his sullen face, and to the car she ran.
Without a backward glance she called, "Behave yourself, young man!"
Then Grandma, feigning sweetness, said, "We all could watch TV.
Your grandpa's in his favorite chair. I'll fix a snack for three."
To punctuate his discontent, Nick stomped a heavy tread.
Though as it faded, Grandma hoped, "He'll settle once he's fed."
His Grandpa, who had been relaxed, saw Nick and rolled his eyes.
He lied right through his dentures, "Nicky, what a...nice...surprise."
"How can you stand it, Grandpa—staring at that old antique?!"
Nick glowered at the cabinet, while in a fit of pique.
"Its screen is small, the picture rolls, and there is no remote.
Our television's newer—NICER!" Nick began to gloat.
"Hey, this ol' fella's fine by me," was Grandpa's calm reply.

“Well, I hope no one asks me to help move it when you die.
Just look! The heavy thing’s a better table than a tube!”
All of his Grandma’s trinkets rattled as he kicked the cube.
“Do they still make a model built to sit right on the floor?”
Exhausted of all tolerance, the man could bear no more.
“I’ll go and check on Grandma,” was the pretense he employed,
To rob Nick of his endless need to see adults annoyed.
“Despite the inconvenience, you’ll survive; no need to fuss.”
“I wish I were at home!” “Yes, that makes two—no, three of us.”
Left stung by such an exit line, Nick kicked the side again.
This tantrum served no purpose, since his grandpa fled the den.
Yet, even so, he felt as if he wasn’t quite alone.
The sense became a certainty as wood began to moan.
An unseen force had started pressing upward from within.
Intrigued, the boy leaned closer to discern the growing din.
Mere inches from the bulging top, an anguish—most severe—
Had overtaken Nick as something plunged into his ear.
Instinctively, he pulled and screamed as blood poured down the lobe,
Aware that he was tethered by some sentient metal probe.
Somehow a rusty wire had secured him to the frame.
His eyes and lips were poked and snagged as other tendrils came.
Jerked forward by those sturdy strands, Nick used his arms to brace—
A rash and desperate action with those cables in his face.
Next, painful tearing followed as his skin ripped here and there,
And flailing limbs struck curios placed on the box with care.
Drawn down into the splintered surface, broken from the lines,
His head was shredded on the fragments chewed to jagged spines.
Each open vessel in his neck was clogged by copper cord,
Which met no opposition in a body limp and gored.
Before a soul could aid him, Nick’s nightmarish fate was met.
His skinny legs protruded like antennae from the set.
When Grandpa entered through the arch, in disbelief he stood.
“Reception in the family room has never been this good!”



James Michael Shoberg

James Michael Shoberg is a director, designer, and award-winning actor and playwright. His writing credits include numerous fringe plays and collections of both monologues and poems. James is also the Co-Executive Producer, Artistic Director, and Resident Playwright of The Rage of the Stage Players, a fringe theatre company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In 2011, he received the permission of The Butcher Brothers and Lionsgate Films to write, produce, and direct a world-premiere stage adaptation of their award-winning independent horror film, *The Hamiltons*, for The Rage of the Stage Players. James' unique brand of twisted theatre has already attracted attention both nationally and internationally. His most recent endeavor is a currently untitled book of horror poetry for young adults, excerpts of which have appeared in *Beyond the Nightlight*, *Cellar Door III: Animals Anthology*, *Pavor Nocturnus Dark Fiction Anthology*, *Phobos Magazine*, *Sanitarium Magazine*, and *Under the Bed Magazine*, to name a few.



The Darkness

Andrew Fortunato

Physician: Dr. Edgar
9828-SJE41



CASE #97122

The Darkness

By Andrew Fortunato

I awaken at the dawn of night
Entrapped within this terrible sight.
Furious darkness is all I see
As a shrouded abyss surrounds me.
An alien voice begins to speak
With a brooding tongue, turning my body weak.
It says "You've cheated me for the last time."
"Now your old, withered soul is mine."
The blackness swirls in and grabs me,
Sifting into my eyes; I can't see!
My chest pounds of my heart's heavy toll
As the darkness begins to take control.
Cowering in pain, I let out a SCREAM,
Trying to escape this horrible dream.
In desperation, I cry to my wife.
The one I've kept this secret from our entire life.
Struggling to free myself from this shadowy vice,
I realize that I must pay this ultimate price.
Though I did it all for her,
It is my time and we can no longer be together;
For now I'm locked in this dark room, alone forever.



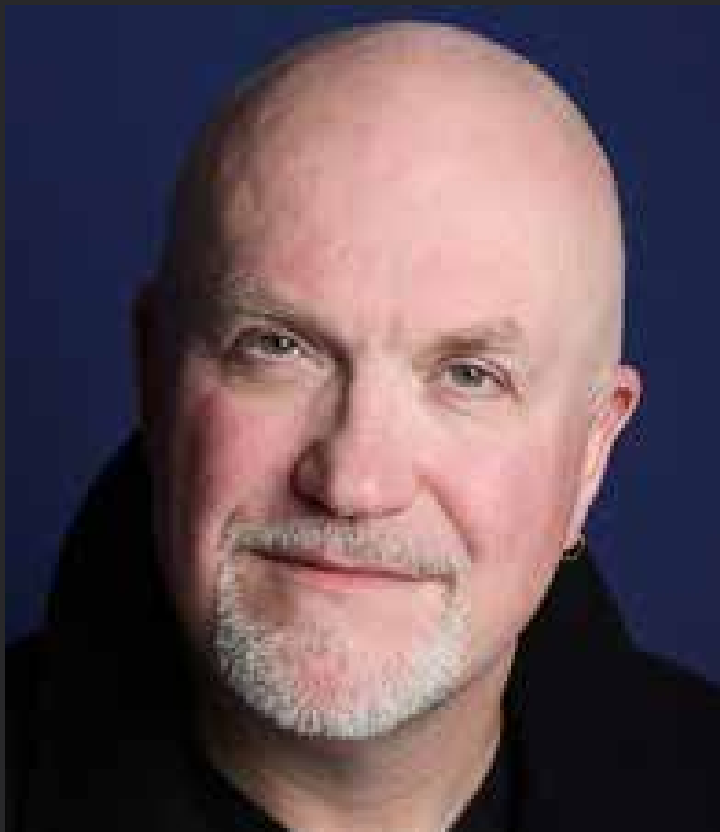
Andrew Fortunato

Details not Released at this Time



On the
Record

NICHOLAS VINCE



A moment with Nicholas Vince:

You've been able to juggle a career as a horror actor, writer, and playwright – and you're now working on your first film project as screenwriter and director. Does one influence the other? Do you take inspiration from your acting roles into your writing, and vice versa?

Each medium is very different in the way the audience experience it. For a reader, a lot of the process happens in their imagination. If I write about a tree, then each reader will see a different tree. On stage, depending on the set, they'll see a suggestion of a tree or be asked to accept something else is a 'tree'. On film, we'd show a particular tree.

When I'm thinking about a scene in a story, play or film, then I imagine it in different ways. Writing a story, I'm in complete control. I can picture how my characters and settings look and sound—though each reader will read a different story, as phrases will resonate differently based on their experience. When I'm writing a play or film, then the audience won't see those words; so I'm writing for the producers, director, actors, and crew. I'm describing for them the stage or screen I see in

my mind.

When writing a play or film, I read dialogue aloud to hear how it plays—I look at it as an actor would, to see if I've made the speech unsayable.

The makeup required for your roles in both Hellraiser and Nightbreed was intense. What's it like when you see yourself transformed for the first time?

In Hellraiser, I couldn't see myself as the Chatterer as I couldn't see out of the mask. So I relied on the reactions of other people on set the first time I wore the makeup, to understand what worked.

In Nightbreed, there was a 5 hour makeup application so I could slowly see my face transform.

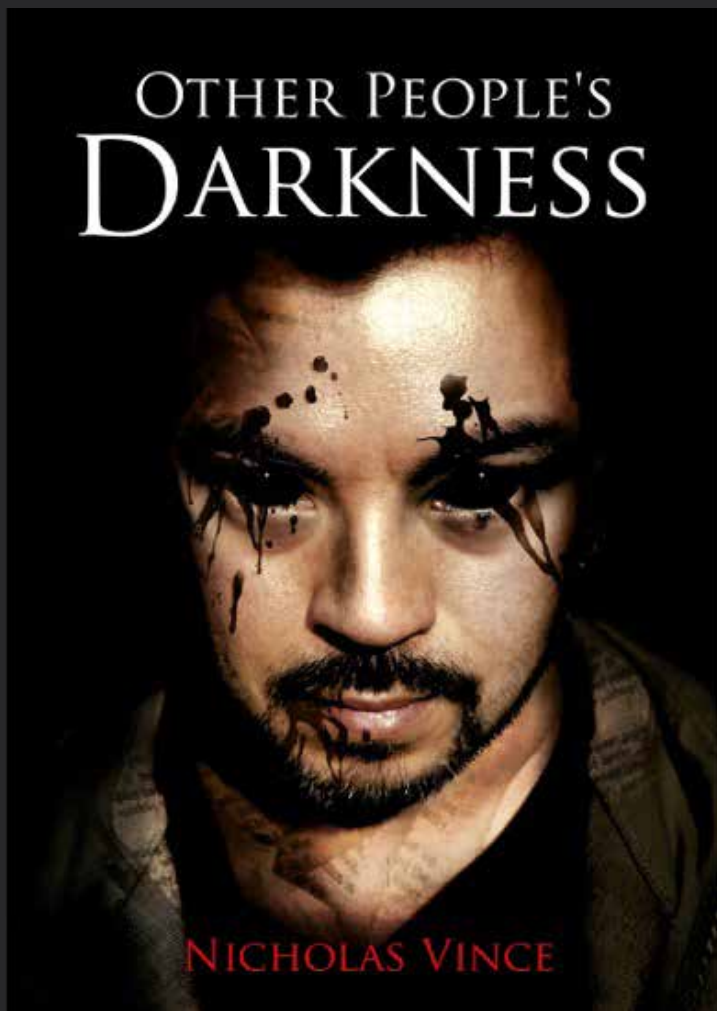
In both cases, though, I'd already seen the sculptures as they were created so I had a good idea of what to expect.

Your writing career spans everything from short story writer to playwright. Taking your stories to the stage must have been a major undertaking. What was the most unexpected part of that process?

How much fun it was. I really enjoyed the process and it's inspired me to write a couple more plays, which I'm doing the research for at the moment.

The challenge with dramatising the story Green Eyes was how to incorporate the narrator into the play and that took me a while to figure out. I wanted to avoid him being outside the action. That's one of the things I love about theatre; in the play it's never explained who this character is. Is he real, just in Justinian's imagination, a memory? Theatre audience's are sophisticated enough to accept the character of Narrator which echoed the chorus in Greek tragedy.

Recently, I attended the 'Gothic' exhibition at the British Library, which includes Bram



Stoker's manuscript for the play of Dracula. He physically cut a pasted speeches from the published novel onto his pages. Which is something I did with the plays, copying and pasting from the story to the play.

Does your writing stay with you, even after you put down the pen (or shut down the computer)? How do you separate your everyday life from the terrifying lives of the characters in your books?

It used to be put down the pencil, but now it's shut down the computer.

It depends how far I've got in a scene. Sometimes I just want to carry on writing until it's all outside my head, but if it's too late at night or I need to go out; then I make on what I'm going to write next, so I can pick up where I've left off. If it's very late at night, then I will sometimes have dreams influenced by what I'm writing, but more often it's the other way round. I'll have a dream, which will inspire a story.

I'm also very easily influenced by what I've seen or read. I watched Alfred Hitchcocks' Vertigo the other evening and dreamt I was on roller skates, on the roof of a very tall building. With not safety barrier. (I'm shuddering as I write this.)

I do try to watch as much Pixar, Disney and comedy as I can, just to get some relief from the darkness.

Marvel is a giant franchise, of which you have been a part with your UK comic "Warheads." Is there a difference in your inspiration for comics vs. short stories? Also, how much input did you have on the illustrations for the comic?

With the comics, I was usually writing to a brief provided by the editor. That would give me a background and characters. So, I just had to write the story, panel descriptions and dialogue.

Inspiration usually comes from research, by which I mean newspaper clippings or the material you've been given and the question, 'What if ...'

Back in the 1980's, in the Marvel Method, the writer described what's happening in the panel, how many panels on the page and the dialogue. It's similar to describing a shot in a movie. The artist drew the page, though may decide to change the number of panels etc. The writer then had to rejig the dialogue to make it all fit, before the page was handed to the letterer.



What do you do outside of work? What are some hobbies that your fans would be surprised to know you like to do?

My two hobbies, when I was a teenager and before I went to drama school, were reading books and amateur dramatics. And watching television and films. So, no other hobbies really and definitely no sports.

I walk the dog twice a day, which as he doesn't like other dogs, means I play a game of Pac Man as I try to avoid other owners in the local park.

What types of aspiring actors do you see trying to break into the horror movie industry? Do you see any significant changes in the future of the horror movie genre in the next 5, 10 or 25 years?

The profession of acting has changed a lot since the 1980's. Now, there are a lot more opportunities for actors to 'do it for themselves'. Whereas getting a show together with a bunch of other actors at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival was the way to be seen, now you can put a short video together and load it on YouTube. Having a following on YouTube is a great way for a young actor to give themselves an advantage over others at auditions.

In terms of the future of horror, it's like the rest of the film industry, I suspect you'll see more and more independent, low budget movies where they can utilise cheaper prosthetics and VFX.

Something we like to ask our authors is the impact of the emergence of e-readers into the marketplace. How has it affected you at the micro level, as an author, and on the macro level as an overall horror artist?

I independently published both my recent books via Amazon and Kindle, rather than going through the traditional publishing route, so I'm very grateful this has all happened.

Those led to the plays and I'm now working with an independent film producer, developing part of a horror anthology film as writer, director and actor. I don't think that was as possible in the 1980's.

Yes, there are now some unreadable books and terrible movies out there, which it seems you have to wade through—but, we're living through as significant a change to literature as the introduction of the printing press by Guttenberg. It's something we as creators have to embrace.

What, if anything, scares you? Do you draw on that fear in your writing, acting and directing?

All that I am exists in this 5'10" body, and particularly behind my eyes. So, yes, I write up my scary dreams as stories; recall fear, or try to inspire it in my fellow actors if that's my role.

When it comes to directing, then I hope I'll remember what it was like to be an actor and work to give them everything they need to give a great performance. And that the most important thing is to have fun.

We would like to thank Nicholas for taking the time away from his busy schedule.

We hope you enjoyed the interview and if you would like to check out his latest work. It is available from Amazon and other good bookshops and video shops (if your town still has those!)

Photos used with permission of Claire Grogan Photography



THE DIGITAL DEAD

ISSUE 2

A SILENT STUDIOS PUBLICATION

NAKED
ZOMBIE
GIRL

EXPOSED



FRIGHTFEST

COVERAGE



JESSICA CAMERON
Scream Queen



DEAD SEA

INTERVIEW



ROXANNE PALLETT



ZOMBEAVERS



SFX ZONE

MOVIES: I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE 2, LAZARUS: DAY OF THE LIVING DEAD **BOOKS:** STAR WARS DEATH TROOPERS, THE WALKING DEAD, ZOMBIE SURVIVAL MANUAL **EVENTS:** DAWN OF THE DEAD, ZOMBIE PIER WALK **GAMES:** DEAD ISLAND 2, DYING LIGHT **COMPETITIONS:** SIGNED BOOKS, DVD'S AND LOTS MORE ZOMBIE GOODIES